

**“AN ETHICALLY CHARGED EVENT”:
STYRON, RUSHDIE AND THE RIGHT TO SPEAK**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the
Degree of Masters of Arts in English
in the University of Canterbury
by
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University of Canterbury

2006

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, Lesley and Roger. Dad, thank you for instilling in me the high expectations I always strive hard to achieve. Mum, for your unswerving optimism I will be eternally grateful. Your support has been unconditional and invaluable.

To Mark, working with you not just on the thesis, but also for all of my postgraduate study has been truly Joyful. Your confidence in both my ability and in the challenging topic of my thesis has made all the difference.

Maureen Montgomery, thank you for your help in the beginning and for setting me on the right path.

To Liz Bond for answering questions no one else could answer.

Marcus, for your unfailing support and understanding. I hope to repay the favour.

Melissa, for being there every step of the way. Thanks to you, Sara and Louise for a wonderful year of friendship that will last a lifetime.

Finally, to all those people with words of wisdom and support, thank you.

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Abstract

In Derek Attridge's J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (2004), the novel is referred to as "an ethically charged event, one that befalls individual readers and, at the same time, the culture within which, and through which, they read" (xii). The ethical positions of individuals, communities and cultures are addressed through one of the most explosive issues in imaginative fiction: "the right to speak." What happens when a novelist not only encroaches on the values of an ethnic group or religion but also speaks on their behalf, as if from within that community or belief? This question has become especially charged with the emergence since the 1960s of "cultural politics": the identification of a political viewpoint within each discrete community in a multicultural society, and the resolute claim by each community to represent its history and values in its own terms. I consider this question by way of the responses to two novels: William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses (1988).

Both of these novels were highly controversial when they were released, inciting anger among minority groups because they transgressed the limits of representation. Styron's novel challenged the right to speak because, as a White man, he attempted to portray the consciousness of a Black slave. The African-American community, during a time of upheaval, radicalism and assertion of their power, responded with vitriol, arguing that Styron's novel was a racist, stereotypical, appropriation of Black history. The allegedly blasphemous portrayal of Islam in Rushdie's Satanic Verses created even greater controversy throughout the Islamic world and British Muslim community – their anger amplified by a feeling of betrayal by one of their own. These novels illustrate the ethical

dilemmas of the representations of minority groups and make urgent the question of whom has the right to speak for them in literature.

Increasingly the tensions between individualistic White liberal ideology and communitarian sensitivities about the representation of their cultures, religions, histories and identities are being contested through the site of the novel. Satanic Verses and Nat Turner demonstrate the challenges faced by multicultural societies when liberals and communitarians force themselves into a manufactured binary through which no effective debate can take place. While the novelist's right to speak should be defended precisely because of the ethical dilemmas that can be presented by literature, freedom of speech is never absolute. The "ethical event" of the novel requires a more nuanced response, which recognises both the valuable and the potentially destructive nature of literature.

Chapter 1: Introduction

. . . the impulses and acts that shape our lives as ethical beings – impulses and acts of respect, of love, of trust, of generosity – cannot be adequately represented in the discourses of philosophy, politics, or theology, but are in their natural element in literature; and this is not so much because literary works are capable of mimicking our daily existence and the choices it presents us with, but rather because they are capable of taking us through an intense experience of those other-directed impulses and acts. The inventive literary work, therefore, should be thought of as an ethically charged event, one that befalls individual readers and, at the same time, the culture within which, and through which, they read.

– Derek Attridge J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading xii.

In late 2005 the publication of twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten created a furore throughout the Muslim world.¹ The battle lines were drawn between Muslims, on one side, who felt that a sacred element of their religion – the proscription against visually representing the prophet – had been blatantly ignored and flouted by Europeans. On the other side was the Western press, for whom the defence of the right to free speech and freedom of the press, foundations of the White liberal values which are so often touted as universal, became a reason to publish the cartoons. What this controversy demonstrated was that there was a fundamental gap between the understandings of Muslims and liberals. It should be noted, however, that this gap is a somewhat manufactured binary, no doubt hardened by Western and Islamic terror. The sides are in fact porous, but have been forced into a confrontation more extreme than

many of those within the categories would subscribe to. Thus, both sides hold onto their views with such stringency, and believe with such determination that the defence of their beliefs is fundamental to their existence and identity, that there is no opportunity for compromise and therefore no room for debate on these issues.

The reason I start my thesis with this example is that it confirms, in a very recent example, how the issue of the right to speak is still fervently alive in Western society. The intersection of ethnicity, identity and representation is very complex and difficult to negotiate. The questions of who has the right to represent other groups and whether the principles of free speech or the sensitivities of the minority or non-Western community should be respected are difficult to answer authoritatively. Flemming Rose, the culture editor of Jyllands-Posten claimed he had commissioned the cartoons because he was tired of the “self-censorship” that was prevalent in discussion of Islam. Rose argued that everyone should have the right to speak on Islam, regardless of their beliefs. While this unrestricted licence could be thought of as commendable and the paper might be seen as a bastion of free speech, Jytte Klausen, a Danish commentator on the issue noted, “[t]his all would have been very well if the paper had a long tradition of standing up for fearless artistic expression. But it so happens that three years ago, Jyllands-Posten refused to publish cartoons portraying Jesus, on the grounds that they would offend readers,” the rejection of those cartoons raises the question, “can you offend Muslim readers but not Christian readers?” Klausen concluded that the Mohammed cartoons were printed not with a desire to preserve freedom of the press but, “as a gag, the kind you do when the news is slow” and that the paper wanted “to instigate trouble, just not the kind of trouble it got.” These different interpretations of the right to speak and the right to offend the Other, demonstrate how fraught the negotiations are between the increasingly

uncompromising defenders of communitarian and liberal rights, and these difficulties are concentrated in the representation of Otherness in the key literary texts examined here.

The ability of fiction to make the reader feel compassion for those who inhabit a space beyond their own experience is a fundamental value of the novel. To create such fiction the writer often must step outside their own immediate experience to imaginatively enter other lives. Yet the contemporary politics of ethnicity and the predilection for having people from the margins speak on their own behalf complicates the ability of writers to transcend their own experience through their writing. As literature has become accessible to a wider range of writers and readers, the negotiation of the limits of authority and representation have become particularly challenging. In my thesis, I examine who has “the right to speak” in contemporary literature by exploring the transgression of those limits in two controversial novels: William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988). Although I will necessarily confine my thesis to these two texts, this topic is applicable to the work of many writers from postcolonial backgrounds and ethnic minorities whose work is circulating in increasingly multicultural Western societies and White writers who step outside the frames of their own identities to write. All these writers frequently face scrutiny of the accuracy or appropriateness of their portrayals. Some non-Western and minority writers such as Arundhati Roy and Toni Morrison have been criticised by their own communities for what was considered inappropriate representations, especially when their work is promoted in the White Western literary market.

The increasing demand for cultural authenticity has resulted in the identity of some authors becoming the subject of controversy. One of the most significant Australian Aboriginal authors, Mudrooroo Narogin, became caught up in a debate about his ethnicity that has compromised his position within the Aboriginal community. Another Australian,

Helen Demidenko, gained acclaim for her novel The Hand that Signed the Paper (1994) on the Ukrainian experience of the Holocaust but was later discovered to be Helen Darville, the daughter of English parents with no connection to the Holocaust or the Ukraine. In her insightful work on the challenges of Holocaust literature, Reading the Holocaust (1998), Inga Clendinnen observes that the anti-Semitism of Darville's novel was widely ignored before her unmasking; because readers thought she had experienced what she wrote of, she had "the right to speak." The scandals occasioned, especially by Darville's intentional impersonation of Otherness, suggest the formidable link between ethnicity and authority and the complex nature of these issues in contemporary society. New Zealand author Keri Hulme is yet another example of the difficulties of defining the Other, as her right to win the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature for her novel the bone people (1983) was challenged by Pakeha critic C.K. Stead. This debate is discussed by Margery Fee in her article "Why C.K. Stead didn't like Keri Hulme's the bone people: Who Can Write as Other?" an article that is germane to many of the issues I will raise in my thesis.

In many ways, Fee's article is the inspiration of this thesis. Her examination of the complex issues of who can speak as Other in contemporary literature does not have many counterparts in critical study. This area of literature is a particularly problematic one to examine, as it is so difficult to come to any practical conclusion about subjects that often resist definition. Fee discusses the difficult question of how to define the Other with particular reference to the case of New Zealand author Keri Hulme, who has defined herself as Maori and who has been accepted as such by the Maori community. Her right to win the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature for her novel the bone people (1983) was challenged by Pakeha commentator C.K. Stead, who claimed that Hulme should not be considered Maori, as only one of her great grandparents was Maori. This repeats an ancient and very dubious view of race and the definition of the Other, as based entirely on

blood. Biological connections are a useful way to define authors as belonging to a particular race or ethnicity, yet Hulme has biological links to both the Maori and Pakeha communities. With Stead implying that Hulme is not Maori enough, Fee raises the obvious problem of how many great grandparents are enough? Especially in a world which is increasingly multicultural, there are few people who could claim to have completely pure blood lines. Fee goes on to suggest that there should be a delicate balance of biological ties, community acceptance and ideological alignment that combines to allow an author to be considered to write as Other; and Fee also comes to the conclusion that White writers should not write as Other. Although I appreciate Fee's position, because of the complex nature of community membership in multicultural societies such restrictions on the literary imagination may not markedly reduce the controversial impact of literary texts like the ones examined in this thesis.

The right to speak has developed into one of the most contentious issues of contemporary literature. It has been exacerbated by the Western preference for postcolonial and minority literature that has developed over the last few decades and the development of cultural politics which has emphasized the need for literature and history *about* the Other to be written *by* the Other. The issue of the right to speak is complicated both by White liberal thought, which values freedom of speech, and also by the genre of the novel itself, which is based upon the idea of imaginatively entering other lives. There are a number of other areas beyond those of culture which the right to speak impacts on, such as feminist thought and Holocaust writing. Feminism was one of the first areas in which the right to speak was raised, and a particularly important work in regard to this is Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1969). It is one of the foundation texts of feminism and Millet was one of the first to raise the question of who can speak for the Other, in this case women. Millet closely examines the depiction of women and sex in the works of

canonical authors such as D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. She questions the ability of these male writers to represent the interior world of women and the world of sexual politics, not just because of their lack of personal experience but also because they were writing from a position of entrenched power. This is analogous to Fee's claim that White writers should not write as Other, because "the risk is too great that privilege has obliterated that writer's awareness of difference" (27), although Fee is much less polemical and more balanced than Millet, reflecting a shift in the cultural and feminist politics since the early 1970s.

Another area of significant debate over the right to speak is that of Holocaust literature. Many survivors and philosophers believe that silence is the only appropriate response to such extreme trauma. There are also debates on whether the literary subject of the Holocaust should be the exclusive domain of survivors and the Jewish community. Styron's novel Sophie's Choice (1979) challenges such beliefs. Styron himself has no connection to the Holocaust, and he is intent on showing the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust, with his heroine Sophie a Polish Catholic survivor of the concentration camps. The novel is very provocative in its refusal to portray Sophie as entirely innocent; instead, Styron renders terms like innocent and guilty, perpetrator and victim in far more obscure ways than is typical when writing about the Holocaust. The limits of representation are particularly stringent in determining who can represent the Holocaust; the system of representation tends to be far more closed to those who are outsiders to the community of Holocaust survivors or the wider Jewish community. Both of these groups have a legitimacy to speak entailed by their personal connection with the tragedy. People who contest the limits of representation of the Holocaust, particularly outsiders like Styron, encounter the most severe criticism. While Styron is attempting to challenge the system of

representation, he must do it from an outsider's position, which inherently weakens his authority and power with some audiences.

Another element that has impact on the idea of the right to speak is the tension between what I refer to in the thesis as 'White liberalism' and the more communitarian principles to which many minority groups adhere. By White liberalism, I mean the beliefs based on the traditional notion of liberalism, which was a response to the European religious wars of sixteenth-century and started to gain momentum during the Enlightenment.² These beliefs include, but are not limited to, the principals of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, individualism, equality, human rights and secularism. There is a sharp difference between the individualist concerns of White liberalism and the more collective, communitarian conception of identity of minority groups and non-Western people which, "creates a wide and essentially unbridgeable chasm between a West devoted to individual values arrived at through personal choice and the rest of the world where these values are either reviled or relegated to a minor place" (Franck 603), resulting in a situation where Samuel P. Huntington argues "the values that are most important to the West are least important world wide" (qtd. in Franck 603).

At the foundation of White liberalism is the belief that these principles will enable all people to live in harmony and without oppression. Of course, liberal principles are based on the ideology of Westerners who have largely been the oppressors of modern history. The scepticism with which minority groups may approach these ideals is understandable considering such oppressions as North American slavery occurring in a country which prides itself on adhering to these principals of freedom and individualism. There are also problems with White liberals believing that they are on the side of the oppressed. This is apparent in Styron's novel, as he felt he was doing something positive for the African-American community, but Black critics argued that he was trespassing on

their territory by writing in the first person about Nat Turner. There are inevitably problems when the White liberal attempts to identify with the oppressed when he himself is not oppressed. The “fundamentalist liberalism” that was apparent in the Rushdie Affair, as with the Mohammed cartoons, becomes divorced from the professed aim of liberalism – to be able to identify with the oppressed and to facilitate tolerance. It is a retreat into an idea of cultural superiority based on a set of values – freedom, scepticism – supposedly concentrated on one side of the divide between enlightened self and savage Other

It is important to acknowledge that liberalism is a vast ideology, and the way in which these ideals are expressed and the significance of them varies. There are nuances between, for example, the liberalism of Styron and the editors who published the Mohammed cartoons. Styron feels his liberalism is positive for the oppressed and part of his defence of the right to speak is based upon the view that he is helping the oppressed. The editors who republished the Mohammed cartoons were more focussed on the protection of the rights and liberties afforded to them under liberal ideology, which they argued should be defended even if it offends the Other (although freedom of the press is a value which is often considered by liberals to be necessary to stop oppression). There is yet more difference again between both of those situations and the rationale behind the invasion of Iraq. George W. Bush, who also ostensibly supports ideals of freedom from oppression, manifests his defence of freedom in a crusade which deems the West as superior both materially and in terms of values, and believes the West must save the Third World from itself. All of these views, however, privilege the ideals of liberalism based on individual values, and paternalistically believe that the dissemination of these views is needed to enable the world to live harmoniously and therefore need to be stringently defended. Radical Islam, and much of the non-Western world, rejects both the liberal

West and the “crusader” West, it is true. However, these are important distinctions nevertheless.

In this thesis, I intend to examine each novel in a separate chapter and discuss how each relates to the right to speak. Thus, in Chapter Two of the thesis “Strange Territory”: Trespassing on the Experience of the Other in William Styron’s Nat Turner, I shall examine the issue of the dominant speaking as the Other, and how this controversial text sparked intense debate within the African-American community. This concern culminated with the publishing of a collection of essays, William Styron’s “Nat Turner”: Ten Black Writers Respond (1968), which attacked Styron and the novel the following year. Styron is of course very much an outsider to the African-American community and part of the dominant majority. His cultural history is diametrically opposed to that of African-Americans. Styron has made a name for himself by writing novels on topics that are taboo, as discussed earlier with regard to Sophie’s Choice. Nat Turner is what Styron calls a “meditation on history” (ix), as it is based on an historical figure – the slave rebellion leader, Nat Turner – about whom little is known.

Writing a novel about so prominent a figure in African-American history inevitably involved Styron in deeply fraught issues of representation, stereotype and ownership; yet the vehemently negative response from the African-American community is brought into sharper focus by examination of the text and its context. In the novel, Styron is not only speaking *about* the Other, he is speaking *as* the Other. He assumes the voice of Nat Turner himself, an impudent move for anyone Other to the African-American experience, but particularly so for the grandson of a slave owner. In addition to this, the characterisation of Nat Turner, and several incidents in the novel could be categorised as deliberately inflammatory on Styron’s part. Nat is portrayed as an educated slave and religious zealot. The more problematic representations, however, are of Nat engaging in homosexual

relations with a younger man, and fantasising about raping White women. The historical and contemporary sensitivity associated with this depiction makes it one of the most significant elements of Styron's portrayal of Turner. The figure of the "black-beast-rapist" has remained a powerful stereotype in the American imagination, with African-American males being characterised as sexually aggressive towards White women (Painter 208).

It is little wonder then that this novel, which was published in 1967, a period of tremendous racial tension throughout the United States, was so controversial. It was not without its successes, however, with Styron receiving much critical acclaim within the mainstream White literary community. In this chapter of the thesis, I wish to pay close attention to the content of the novel and to the content of the debates about the novel during the year of its release and beyond. While I would characterise the content of the novel as deliberately risky, I do not believe Styron anticipated the overwhelmingly negative response Nat Turner would elicit from the African-American community. Taking into consideration another of Styron's divisive novels, Sophie's Choice, I believe that using the medium of the novel to create a space where a particular audience can interrogate their beliefs and will be challenged is a significant purpose of Styron's writing. The techniques he uses to promote self-examination from his target audience unintentionally, but not surprisingly, also cause acute controversy within another section of his audience. He writes for those like him, who have not directly experienced what he writes of. It speaks to the heart of what the purpose and boundaries of literature are. Is it possible to speak for the Other; are there areas that are off limits? Styron obviously believes in the power of literature to transcend cultural and ethnic experience but more than that, he believes unreservedly in the writer's right – indeed perhaps obligation – to test the limits of cultural ownership of particular histories.

The third chapter of my thesis “A Familiar Strangeness”: Interpreting the Experience of the Other in Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses, will explore the problems when representation of the Other comes to represent a whole community or society. For this section, I will examine Salman Rushdie’s most controversial novel Satanic Verses. Rushdie is in the peculiar position of being what Timothy Brennan in Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation (1989) calls a “Third World interpreter,” whereby the West has become so used to Rushdie as the voice of the Other that an unquestionable authority imbues his views and writing. The West has "selected" Rushdie as a suitable representative for the Third World, in all likelihood because Rushdie is representing a view of the Third World which the West agrees with but which those whom he is speaking for may not.

Brennan calls Rushdie, and a select group of other Third World writers such as Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Derek Walcott “Third World cosmopolitans” (viii). Brennan defines cosmopolitans as:

. . . those writers Western reviewers seemed to be choosing as the interpreters and authentic public voices of the Third World – writers who, in a sense, allowed a flirtation with change that ensured continuity, a familiar strangeness, a trauma by inches. Alien to the public that read them because they were Black, spoke with accents or were not citizens, they were also like that public in tastes, training, repertoire of anecdotes, current habitation. (viii-ix)

While the reasons behind the “selection” of Rushdie by the West will be explored in more detail, I also wish to expand on this idea by approaching it from another perspective. Although suggesting Rushdie has been “selected” by the West to be an interpreter of the Third World is valid, it essentially nullifies Rushdie’s own power of selection. For as

much as the West selected Rushdie, it would appear for such an interpretation of the Third World to occur, Rushdie would also have to select the West as an audience, or at least be aware of their selection of him. Such awareness is apparent in Satanic Verses because Rushdie does address more than one audience in his novel. “The West,” particularly immigrants to the West are addressed, as well as those who remain in the Third World. Acknowledging Rushdie’s participation in and awareness of the politics of contemporary literature and the modern publishing industry allows a reading of his most engaged and difficult work that grants the author, rather than just the West, the power of selection.

The differences between Rushdie’s audiences and how he addresses them in Satanic Verses again raises the concept of multiple audiences with different world views and positions within the hierarchy of power that is present in my analysis of these texts. How the writer manages to destabilise the position of the reader is also very pertinent to this novel. Rushdie’s destabilisation of the audience reflects his own destabilised position, where he is both an insider and an outsider to a number of different communities: those of the Third World, of Islam, of immigrant Britain, of the Western intellectual elite. Rushdie’s membership of these multiple communities affects his interpretation of the Third World, and there are significantly different reactions to his “interpretation” from each of those communities.

The issue of White liberalism is particularly pertinent to Rushdie’s situation, as the argument came to represent a prominent Western view of an unbridgeable dichotomy between the enlightened West versus the backward, restrictive East. Yet it is valuable to examine how the ideology of liberalism, which is so often set up as the polar opposite of Islamic fundamentalism in the East, is itself fundamentalist in a sense. The values of White liberalism are non-negotiable for many in the West and have been entrenched by the dispute with Islamic fundamentalism. Just as Islamic fundamentalism is thought to be a

closed system, in many ways so is White liberalism. There is a belief that all the world's cultures should "progress" towards White liberalism, that it is a natural progression, but this is certainly not what many non-Western people believe. It is also not necessarily what Rushdie believes either, for while he does endorse White liberal views in Satanic Verses, the novel is not a complete attack on Islam and absolute endorsement of the West as it came to be viewed in the Western media. Rushdie's relationships with Islam, White liberalism and immigrant minorities are far more complex, and will be examined in detail in this chapter. Comparing and contrasting these two novels, which are very different but both surrounded by their own controversies related to the right to speak, should bring me closer to an understanding of how politics, race and position affect the right to speak from certain positions and on certain topics, in contemporary literature. While firm conclusions are difficult to make in response to complex issues such as these, I will examine the possible restraints and limitations on the right to speak, and what place they have in contemporary literature in the conclusion.

Chapter 2: “Strange Territory”: Trespassing on the Experience of the Other in
William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner

For one of the enduring marvels of art is its ability to soar through any barrier, to explore any territory of experience, and I say that only by venturing from time to time into strange territory shall artists, of whatever commitment, risk discovering and illuminating the human spirit that we all share.

– William Styron, Acceptance Speech for the Howells Medal, May 26
1970.

In this section of the thesis I examine the implications of William Styron’s trespass into the “strange territory” of the racial Other in his novel The Confessions of Nat Turner. Styron is a White American author from the South. Prior to Nat Turner, he had written two novels, Lie Down in Darkness (1951) and Set This House on Fire (1960), with his debut novel being particularly well received by critics. The publication of his third novel in 1967 was a literary event highly anticipated by both critics and the general reading audience. The novel received the highest advance in American history at that time and it also set a record when the National Book Club paid \$500,000 for rights to the novel. Expectations were high and there was a lot of public interest in the novel, parts of which had previously been serialised in Harpers magazine in previous years and months. The first reviews of the novel were very favourable and it appeared to be an instant critical and commercial success; however, the reception of Nat Turner was to become drastically different over the coming months as the novel became caught up in a new phenomenon:

cultural politics.³ Race, stereotyping, politics and the ownership of history were highly politicised in the late 1960s, and Styron's novel became a site of fierce contestation.

Before discussing the sharply different responses to Nat Turner – driven above all by race – the subject matter and style of presentation of the novel must be considered, so as to understand the controversy it provoked. Nat Turner was an historical figure Styron had wanted to write about for some time. In various interviews and his own writings on the creative process that produced Nat Turner he explains how the desire to write such a novel began in boyhood for him, and that it was only because he felt that he did not yet have the literary skill to tell the story adequately, that he did not attempt to write it earlier. However, after the favourable reception of Lie Down in Darkness and the publication of a further novel Set This House on Fire, and one novella The Long March (1961), Styron finally felt it was time to tell the story of Nat Turner, so in 1962 he began to write.

Nat Turner was an educated slave in Jerusalem, Virginia, which is only about thirty miles from where Styron grew up in Tidewater, Virginia. In 1831 Turner led what Styron considers “the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery” (Nat Turner ix). He led a small band of other slaves across the county, eventually killing sixty-six White men, women and children. When the rebellion began to disintegrate Turner escaped and hid for some thirty days until being captured and imprisoned. During his imprisonment his White lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, wrote down Turner's confessions, which Gray claimed he wrote “with little or no variation, from his own words” (Nat Turner xii). The confessions were published as a pamphlet called “The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. (1831).” After these confessions were taken down, Nat was executed, as the other surviving members of the rebellion had been. The rebellion incited a great deal of fear about slaves in the South and it provided further impetus for the tightening of laws against them. It was Styron's belief

that much of the tragedy of Nat Turner lay in the fact that abolition would have come far sooner in Virginia, and possibly the rest of the South, had the rebellion not stirred up fears about slaves.

This view of the impact of the Turner rebellion and the characterisation of Nat in the novel have been contested by Black reviewers who argue that Styron was trying to convince contemporary Black Nationalists that their efforts to radically mobilise the African-American community would prove at best futile, or at worst detrimental to the cause of Black civil rights. This concern from Black reviewers was justifiable considering Styron's comments about the race riots in Detroit that occurred shortly before his book was released: "[h]e acknowledged the social and psychological wellsprings of Black rage but feared that the riots would produce a backlash from Whites, similar to the 'harsh restrictions' imposed on 'Negroes all over the South' after Nat Turner's Rebellion" (French 246). Styron is not the only one who could be accused of conflating slave rebellions and contemporary Black radicalism, as much of the media made the connection between the incident described in his novel and the riots. Indeed, Styron's comments were the result of a newspaper's soliciting his opinion on the riots as an expert on slave rebellions. The very fact that an expert on slave rebellions – though it was questionable as to whether Styron should be considered as such – was being sought out as a commentator on contemporary revolution in the African-American community demonstrates that much of the mainstream considered the two analogous.

Styron certainly believed the Nat Turner uprising to be a futile exercise overall, with at least one critic suggesting that this theme of futility was one of the reasons Styron's novel was so popular, because it told "the White middle class reader what he is conditioned to believe, the message that militant Black struggle is futile" (103 Shapiro). But while Styron is convinced that the Nat Turner rebellion did nothing if not set back

abolition, other scholars have suggested that “[t]he Turner revolt helped produce a national atmosphere in which a comprehensive assault upon slavery could be mounted” (104 Shapiro). Whatever the effect on abolition in Virginia may have been, the rebellion certainly led to vicious reprisals against slaves and freed slaves in Virginia, regardless of their involvement, or lack thereof, in the rebellion, resulting in some two hundred African-American deaths. Little historical evidence or information remains on the Nat Turner rebellion, beyond that clearly suspect “Confession” taken down by Gray, which in 1962 formed the starting point for Styron’s novel, The Confessions of Nat Turner.

Styron began researching the rebellion in the 1950s; in a letter to his father dated 1952 while he was in Paris, Styron explains, “I’ve finally pretty much decided what to write next – a novel based on Nat Turner’s rebellion. . . . It’ll probably take a bit of research, though, and I’ve written to people in the U.S. . . . asking them to pass on any reference material they might have” (Casciato and West 568). It is vital to note the early beginnings of Styron’s novel, as while its publication came in a period of major political and cultural upheaval, he began to write the novel in quite a different cultural and political context than that which the novel was released into in 1967. Although Styron claims that he “was never anything but intensely aware of the way in which the theme of slave rebellion was finding echoes in the gathering tensions of the civil rights movement” (Styron “Revisited”), he did not seem to anticipate the furore the novel would generate (yet, considering his similar assault on community sensitivities in his next novel Sophie’s Choice, it is possible he might have had some intimations but chose to overrule the cautious impulse).

The rapid increase of influence of the Black Power movement which asserted Black independence from the more racially integrated non-violent civil rights movement is illustrated by the honorary degree Styron received from the historically Black Wilberforce

University, a few months after Nat Turner was published. Styron's novel was praised for advancing understanding of the impact of slavery on Black life, and Styron was honoured for his efforts at bringing the two races closer together. Styron himself writes about this event with obvious confusion over how quickly the situation changed, explaining that the ceremony at Wilberforce "was a moment of intense warmth and brotherhood. It would have been inconceivable to me that within a short time I would experience almost total alienation from Black people, be stung by their rage, and finally be cast as an archenemy of the race, having unwittingly created one of the first politically incorrect texts of our time" (Styron "Revisited"). In a matter of months Styron, no longer an honoured member of the civil rights struggle, had come to be seen as an ignorant, racist writer who was trespassing on Black territory.

This sudden paradigm shift in the Black community took many in the White community by surprise. Previously the civil rights movement had been non-aggressive, non-violent and had welcomed support from those Whites who wanted to fight against racism alongside the Black community. Disillusioned with the slow progress of these methods, African-Americans increasingly replaced non-violence with Black Nationalism, militancy and Black Power. This trend was consolidated with the murder of Martin Luther King Junior in early 1968. The Black Nationalist groups stressed the need for Black ownership and control of the Black experience; racial solidarity was imperative to the success of this new version of the civil rights movement. There was growing concern among the new Black leaders about White historians writing about Black history, and increasingly there was a move towards Black historians writing Black history, as they were considered to have more cultural authority on the subject. It was thought that history from a Black perspective would better serve the specific needs of the Black community.

This position was obviously at odds with Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner, which not only presents a Black historical figure, but impersonates him by narrating Nat's story in the first person. Styron thus became an author trying to "possess" the Black experience, trespassing on the territory of the Other precisely at the time when the Other was attempting to reclaim their ownership of that territory and inject power into their Otherness. Styron's novel was seen as an attempt to once again assert White dominance, and his characterisation of Nat – who had become a much needed symbol of violent response to the ultimate repression of slavery for the Black Nationalist movement – was seen as an attempt to nullify and emasculate a Black hero. In this chapter, I will examine the responses to Nat Turner and, in particular, the problems with the novel and the characterisation of Nat that were raised in reviews. This will be followed by an examination of the relevance and purpose of the Nat Turner debate to contemporary cultural politics and how it relates to the wider context of my thesis.

* * *

The Backlash to Styron's Nat Turner: A Question of History

The early reviews of Nat Turner were very favourable, Styron himself observing that "[o]nly the most disingenuous of writers would . . . fail to confess being pleased by such a reception" (Styron "Revisited"). These reviews overwhelmingly reflected the perspective of the White literary establishment. However, after a number of months, reviews by Black writers began to be published which were very hostile towards the novel. This started a long-running and contentious debate that raged across major newspapers and journals and eventually resulted in the publication of a collection of essays edited by John

Henrik Clarke, William Styron's "Nat Turner": Ten Black Writers Respond. These ten Black writers were comprised of historians, a psychologist, political commentators and writers, most of whom were widely known and respected in the Black community, if not the White community. They were unequivocally opposed to the novel and its portrayal of Nat Turner. Because the novel could be classified as an historical novel – though Styron himself resisted that exact label, preferring to call it a “meditation on history” (ix, Nat Turner) – the debate naturally included historians as well. This lent another element to the debate, as historians were already struggling with their own concerns regarding the form of the historical novel and the ownership of Black history which makes their reviews quite differently inflected than those from a literary or cultural perspective. Historians were concerned about new ideas regarding who should write Black history, as Scot French explains: “Black Power advocates were demanding Black authorship of Black history. ‘Throughout this country,’ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton wrote in Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (1967), ‘vast segments of Black communities are beginning to recognize the need to assert their definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture’” (244-45).

As Styron's novel is based on an historical figure, the contested meanings of history unavoidably played a part in the creation and reception of the novel. The particular position that Styron attempted to carve out for himself regarding the place of history demonstrates the complexities associated with both historical fiction and the Nat Turner case in particular. Styron did attempt to extricate himself from the confines and complications of the historical novel genre, particularly in his Author's Note at the start of the book, where he states that it was “[his] intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history” (ix). While this statement goes some way towards indicating that

history and its associations with truth, record and accuracy may be somewhat less than straightforward in the novel, Styron does not completely absolve himself of responsibility to the historical record. Indeed, if anything, the Author's Note suggests that the dearth of historical information available on Nat Turner makes Styron's novel a substantial contribution to the understanding of the historical figure Nat Turner. Just as Truman Capote, by calling In Cold Blood (1966) the first non-fiction novel, resisted the label of historical novel and refused to categorise the book as purely fictional, so Styron attempts to establish a new category for his novel – to extricate himself from the confines of the historical novel yet at the same time validate his attempt at writing contestable history.

If Styron's ambiguity as to how his novel was to be perceived with regard to history – combined with the limited and suspect nature of the actual historical record of Nat Turner – created a situation where the historical elements of the novel come under fierce scrutiny, this antagonistic atmosphere was exacerbated by the charged historical moment the novel was released into in 1967. Not only was the accuracy of the historical facts that Styron incorporated questioned, the issue of his "selection" of history fed into a wider debate that was emerging at the time about the tension between a newly emerging cultural politics and historians. The subject of history, in particular Black history, who wrote it, what was presented, the image it projected, and who "owned" it, was an extremely contested issue at the time. Nat Turner the novel and Nat Turner the man became significant sites of this debate, and thus history became one of the major focal points of reviews of the novel and the ensuing controversy over it.

Before examining the responses to Styron's construction of history in the novel, it is imperative to examine Styron's own position on the history of slavery and what historical sources he used. Regarding the story of Nat Turner, Styron has often made mention that, "[a]side from Nat's own Confessions and a number of contemporary

newspaper articles . . . there was virtually no material of that period that was useful in shedding further light on Nat Turner as a person or on the uprising” (“Revisited”). Indeed, there is little information available on Nat Turner, which makes it all the more significant what secondary sources Styron consulted. Styron has often mentioned that he looked upon the lack of concrete information on Nat Turner as an advantage for writing the novel, as he was “[placed] in the ideal position of knowing neither too much nor too little” (“Revisited”). In his Author’s Note, Styron also claims that he “rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge of Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt,” Styron “allowed [him]self the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events” while, as he puts it, “remaining within the bounds of what meagre enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery” (ix).

It would appear that for information on Nat Turner, Styron mainly relied on the “Confession” itself, written by Thomas Gray, the most well known historical source on Turner and that from which almost all others are derived. Regarding his views on slavery, Styron has discussed his desire to write a book which was somewhere between the more apologist writings of Stanley Elkins (who was influenced by the classic apologist Ulrich B. Phillips), describing slavery as an often benign institution, and the revisionist writings of Kenneth Stampp which regarded slavery as complete, unabated horror. Styron’s psychological understanding of slavery was heavily influenced by Elkins’ book Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959), which upholds the stereotype of the Sambo slave – slaves whose sense of self-worth has been so broken by the institution that they are happy, docile and childlike. In addition to these sources, Styron also mentions that, “[a]t the time of writing Nat Turner, I felt that as an amateur historian I had absorbed a vast amount of reading on slavery in general, not only by way of

a great number of antebellum books and essays but through much recent scholarship in the exploding field of the historiography of the slave period . . .” (“Revisited”).

Elkins’ ideas on the psychological effect of the institution on slaves were based heavily on the idea that “American slavery was a tightly closed system, not unlike the Nazi concentration camps in World War II, and so psychologically oppressive that it made the slave absolutely dependent upon the master” (115 Duff and Mitchell). This parallel between slavery and the Holocaust is one which Styron returned to in his next novel Sophie’s Choice. The comparison of slavery and the Holocaust has proven controversial for both African-Americans and Jews. The ten Black writers claimed that Elkins’ notion of the Sambo was offensive and a convenient racist fantasy. Although Styron was likely motivated by his White liberal views, believing that by suggesting the institution of slavery so damaged the slaves’ psyche that they could no longer function at an adult level he was highlighting the horrors of slavery, the ten Black writers argued that he was denigrating African-Americans and also “implying that Negroes were docile and content with slavery” (Clarke viii).

In Sophie’s Choice, the comparison of slavery and the Holocaust was criticised by some Jewish commentators, who – while acknowledging that slavery was horrific – believed that it was quite different from the systematic extinction of Jewish people that was attempted by the Nazis.⁴ Although slavery was certainly an element of the concentration camps, the overall purpose of North American slavery and the Holocaust was different. The purpose of the concentration camps was death, with enslavement of their victims being a functional interlude for the Nazis; the purpose of Black slavery was the increased economic productivity of slave labour. Causing the death of the slave was not the overall purpose of the system, although it was a common result because of the harsh and unforgiving conditions of life as a slave. Certainly both African-Americans and

Jews were considered to be outside the “master race” and often characterised as sub-human, but the consequence of this ideology for one was slavery and for the other extinction. This comparison of the suffering of African-Americans and Jews has been employed by African-American writer Toni Morrison, who faced criticism when she suggested that the Holocaust and slavery were just different versions of “solutions” to the “problem” of minority groups.⁵

In his book That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (1988) Peter Novick briefly examines the phenomenon of Jewish historians who write about Black history, suggesting that “those who have written the most influential studies of White attitudes and behaviour toward Blacks were almost all gentiles . . . those who wrote of Blacks as subjects, were overwhelmingly Jewish” (479). Novick suggests that this is because there are those in history who feel guilt because they identify with the master race, and those who feel outrage, because they identify themselves with the oppressed.⁶ This of course suggests a reason why Styron seemed unable to write a novel from the point of view of an African-American which would resonate with the Black community. Because of his inescapable identification with the oppressors of history his writing was possibly driven by guilt more than outrage, a feeling with which it would obviously be difficult for a Black readership to identify. The problem of liberal guilt or how White liberalism in general affects readers – both White liberals and those outside that readership – is one of significant importance to this thesis. Lerone Bennett Junior, one of the ten Black writers, touches on this problem in his essay “Nat’s Last White Man,” explaining that:

[t]he difference in tone between the “Confessions” of Gray, the racist, and Styron, the White liberal, gives one pause. Gray, who loathed Nat but who looked into his eyes, gives him to history unrepentant, courageous, sure of

his act and his eventual vindication. Styron, who says he sympathises with Nat, destroys him as a man and as a leader. And the terrifying implication of this fact is that the fascination-horror of a bigot may be more compelling than the fascination-anxiety of a White liberal. (16)

This again may point to why the novel Nat Turner provoked such a vitriolic response and eventually proved to be irrelevant to the African-American community. One could assume that the ideology of White liberals and the African-American community may be quite similar: they are ostensibly both striving to end oppression. Yet, no matter how much White liberals attempt to identify with the oppressed, they are not oppressed themselves and so cannot fully understand the experience of the oppressed. This may suggest a limit to representing the suffering of others in imaginative fiction when dealing with real historical events.

Bennett seems to suggest that at least with bigots, the Black community knows exactly what to expect and can protect itself more easily from them in some ways. The relationship with White liberals is somewhat more complicated. Though both are striving to relieve oppression, White liberals and the oppressed group often have very different ideas of how to achieve positive change for the oppressed group, or even different ideas of what positive change would be. White liberalism tends to be attached to ideas of universalism; that we are all the same and should be treated the same. Increasingly, however, minority groups do not wish to be considered as the same, they want their differences to be recognised, celebrated and protected, because that is their culture and their identity is thought to be intrinsically linked to that. The problematic nature of White liberalism will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, in relation to Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses.

One of the major subjects of controversy that was brought up by reviewers, in particular those from Ten Black Writers Respond and also Herbert Aptheker, a White historian who wrote American Negro Slave Revolts (1943), was Styron's apparent distortion of history. It was alleged by these commentators that Styron deliberately ignored, misrepresented, omitted and imagined various facts concerning the historical figure of Nat Turner. The major areas of contention regarding Styron's alleged distortion of history were the altering of details regarding Nat's family life, failure to include Nat's slave wife in the story, who taught Nat how to read, and the participation of slaves in the repression of the revolt. There are numerous other concerns that were raised in Ten Black Writers Respond regarding Styron's depiction of Nat, but these will be examined in the following section of this chapter, which looks more broadly at the characterisation of Nat, as they are less related to the distortion of perceived historical facts, and more to do with Styron's novelistic depiction of Nat, where the historical record is lacking. The issues examined immediately below stem from where the ten Black writers accuse Styron of deliberately straying from the known historical facts of Nat Turner and the Southampton Rebellion.

The biggest area of contention regarding the distortion of historical fact by Styron was the existence of a slave wife for Nat. It appears from notes and annotations made by Styron while researching the novel that he was aware of references in the historical sources to Nat Turner's having a slave wife (Casciato and West 569). He felt, however, that the evidence was not particularly convincing, and so did not feel compelled to include her in his novel (or indeed intimate relations of any kind with Black women). The chief historical source for claims of Nat having a wife is an 1861 article in the Atlantic Monthly by Thomas Wentworth Higginson about the Nat Turner insurrection, in which he mentions Nat having a wife, "whom he cannot protect from sexual 'outrage'" (Gross and Bender

501). Higginson's sources are said to be contemporary newspapers, legends and a pamphlet on the subject (not by Gray). Styron dismisses the Higginson account as having little weight as it comes thirty years after the fact, and claims he could find no mention of Nat's having a wife in the contemporary newspapers (although the editor of The Nation who mediated an exchange between Styron and Aptheker on the historical accuracy of the novel points to one). Chiefly, Styron relies on the fact that there is no mention of Nat's having a wife in Gray's "Confessions." It would seem that the evidence for Nat's having a wife is not overwhelming; it is certainly not an indisputable fact as the ten Black writers and Aptheker present it to be. It is far more likely that it was what Styron put in place of Nat's having a wife – desire for the White girl Margaret Whitehead, celibacy, homosexuality – that was the major cause of the anger over his treatment of history. The sexual life Styron created for Nat was far removed from what the African-American community desired for their rebel hero. The problems with these representations by Styron will be examined later in the chapter.

Regarding Nat's family life, Styron alters the impact of Nat's grandmother on his life, and also alters details about his father. Styron has Nat not know his grandmother, although he does in Gray's "Confessions." Nat does, however, have some knowledge of her – he imagines her in a scene in the novel – so she is not entirely without impact upon his life. This is similar to the situation in respect of Nat's father. In Gray's "Confessions" it is said Nat knew his father early on but then he ran away. In Styron's novel his father runs away before Nat knows him, but he is still a force in his life through his mother's telling him how his father stood up to his master and rebelled against the slavery system by running away. Both of these "distortions" by Styron seem relatively insignificant and, had his novel not been so controversial for other reasons, it is unlikely that these elements would have become such a serious concern.

Styron altered these details to suit the story he was telling about Nat Turner, a story which the ten Black writers did not agree with. The story Styron was interested in telling was one about the interaction between Whites and Blacks in slave times, and the way the institution of slavery affected Nat psychologically. He was less interested in the dynamics of Nat's slave family, possibly the reason that Styron also left out Nat's slave wife. Styron appears to be interested in the interaction between Nat and his master(s), Nat and White women, Nat's mother and the Irish overseer. The ten Black writers notice that "the wanderings of Styron's mind seem to focus mainly on [Nat's] relations with White people," and question "Is this because of a commonly held racist view that a Negro who achieves must be primarily doing so because of his associations with Whites?" (Poussaint 18). While it is certainly understandable that the ten Black writers come to his conclusion regarding the erasure of Nat's family from the novel, I think Styron's motivations were less racist and more narcissistic: he was interested in how the story of Nat Turner, the character of Nat Turner, related to him and his history, and so that was the story he wrote. Styron is interested in how the story of Nat Turner and slavery in general relates to him, which is similar to the way he writes in Sophie's Choice – the story is really about Stingo (who is a character Styron closely modelled on his younger self), and how he is affected by Sophie's story of surviving the Holocaust, his sexual obsession with Sophie and his fascination with the horrors of the Holocaust. This comes to the essential reason as to why Nat Turner does not work for African-American readers, and that is because Styron did not and could not write it for them, he wrote it for himself, and so therefore it only works for those like him, who are removed from the Black experience. Just as Sophie's Choice is not a novel which is relevant to Holocaust survivors or those closely affected by it, but does enable outsiders to interrogate their notion of victims, culpability, evil and their fascination with the terrible images and stories from the Holocaust, Nat Turner seems to

have little to offer to the African-American community but enables White readers to interrogate their guilt, stereotypes and preconceptions about slavery.

Essentially, the specific details of history only became significant because the overall story that Styron created out of the historical figure of Nat Turner was so offensive to the African-American community. Styron's motivations were very different to the motivations that an African-American writer telling the story of Nat Turner would have had. Styron was not interested in creating a strong, flawless hero that would fill the need for positive history and be part of the "best foot forward literature" (Harris-Lopez 35) that was important to the African-American community at the time. Similarly, that community were not interested in what the ten Black writers call "an impotent, cowardly, irresolute creature of [Styron's] own imagination The man Styron substitutes for Nat Turner is not only the antithesis of Nat Turner; he is the antithesis of Blackness. In fact, he is a standard Styron type: a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like White intellectual in blackface" (Bennett 5).

Styron also has Nat's first master, Samuel Turner, teach him to read, rather than his parents, as is stated in the "Confessions" by Gray. Styron explains that he did this because he wished to demonstrate one of his main beliefs about slavery, which is "that slavery in its most bestial form was terrible enough but that it was precisely this enlightened benevolence which in the end ameliorated nothing, instilled a false hope, brought Nat to disaster and constituted a betrayal at least as cruel as the nightmare of captivity in the Deep South" (qtd. in Aptheker "An Exchange" 200). It is precisely those times when you are made to feel most human that you feel the condition of slavery most acutely. The ten Black writers, however, believed that Styron was trying to show slavery as a benevolent institution, demonstrating how caring slave owners were. They also believed that the removal of Nat's grandmother and father from his life was calculated to fit in with the

Moynihan Report; released in 1965, it suggested that the breakdown of the African-American family unit meant that economic, political and social equality was unlikely. This report was widely held to stereotype the Black community as poor, troubled and incapable of self-regeneration and so, it is alleged, by removing Nat's family unit Styron has "written a kind of early-day adjunct to the Moynihan Report, whereby the instability of Black family life carries the inevitable corollary that the 'significant others' in Nat's life had to be Whites" (Duberman 113).

Nat's position of knowing both his parents and his grandmother was unusual in slave times and the ten Black writers believed it to be significant with regard to why Nat revolted, as was the existence of his slave wife. Again, Styron's motivations for the story of Nat Turner were focussed more on the relations between Black and White, so rather than having Nat's slave family and wife as the motivation for Turner's revolt, it was more compelling for Styron's novelistic purposes to make the motivation for the revolt based upon his anger at White benevolence. The ten Black writers and Styron have very different views on what the novel achieves, which demonstrates the lack of communication that was able to take place between the two groups. Indeed, Styron seemed to feel he was showing the trauma of slavery on the family unit and how slavery was a system in which even good men were part of a despicable institution. The ten Black writers maintained he was showing masters as benevolent and helpful to ungrateful slaves, and that African-Americans were unable to hold their families together.

Finally, the issue of whether slaves participated in protecting their masters in the Turner rebellion was also a major point of contention regarding the accuracy of Styron's history, and was a particularly contentious issue between Herbert Aptheker and Styron. Aptheker claimed there was absolutely no proof of any such defence being mounted by slaves, and suggested it was Styron's desire to show slaves protecting their slave life – to

show how benign an institution it was – by showing slaves protecting their masters. In an article in The Nation titled “Truth and Nat Turner: An Exchange” Aptheker levels his charge of the misconstruction of history at Styron, who responds to those charges.

Aptheker asserts that:

[c]oncerning the use of armed Black slaves by the masters in Virginia in 1831 to crush Turner’s rebellion, I did say that this was inconceivable and hold to that word. But the main thing I said was that it was untrue and that, furthermore, never in the history of slavery in the United States were Black slaves armed by their masters for slave-suppressing duties. (196)

Yet in the article, the editor of The Nation has added a note explaining that according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, slaves were used against Turner’s rebels. This is the same Higginson who is used to prove that Turner has a wife by Aptheker in the same article. A similar editor’s note is needed in Styron’s response, however, when he claims that there is no mention of Turner’s wife in contemporary newspapers. Here the editor disagrees and refers readers to an article in the Richmond Whig. What this exchange demonstrates most clearly is not that either of these men has access to the “real” Nat Turner, or that either of them knows the “true” history of the rebellion, instead it demonstrates that Nat Turner as an historic figure is unknowable. It also demonstrates how the anger of the debate led respected historians and writers to use and misuse the few – always contentious – “facts” of the case to support their interpretation. The difference is that in the end the novelist rests his case not on the facts, but on the literary imagination.

It is not within the bounds of this thesis to examine in detail the historical record (and the many interpretations) of Nat Turner. What is clear is that there is a lack of credible sources on or by the rebellion leader. The most widely known and relied upon is the “Confessions” by Gray. Yet, it is obvious that even this record, the most detailed and

closely related to Nat that is available, is unlikely to have been written, as Gray claims, “with little or no variation from his own words” (Nat Turner xii) because of the undeniable impact that author and purpose have on this document. A similar charge could be levelled at Styron’s Nat Turner also: that it is invalid because of the undeniable impact of author and purpose. Yet, Styron does not claim his writing to be a work of factual history, he states that it will err from the historical record occasionally, and that above all it is a novel, a work of imagination, about a man that it would seem can only really live in the imagination, be it of Styron, historians or the African-American community. Having read a considerable number of articles, reviews, critiques and the like on the subject of Styron’s Nat Turner and its relation to the historical record, I can only come to the conclusion that the historical record is unreliable, even more so than is normal. What becomes more significant than who is “right” with regard to the historical sources, is what interested readers *notice* about the historical record and why accuracy is demanded in some areas, even when accuracy cannot really be achieved. Rather than use the facts as a measure of “truth” I think it is more useful to examine *why* Styron’s depiction of Nat Turner was so problematic; what was it about the way Nat Turner was presented – sometimes consistently with historical facts, sometimes not – that was so offensive to the ten Black writers and others? How did the contemporary situation affect the weight placed on the historical facts in the reception of the novel? It is now to these questions that I turn, as it is apparent that there does seem to be answer to who the “real” Nat Turner is. The record of history seems, if anything, only to make him more obscure.

The contemporary context into which Nat Turner was released has a direct bearing on how Styron’s novel was received, particularly the hostile reaction of the African-American community. The novel was released at a time when Black Power movements were gaining ascendancy over non-violent civil rights movements, which tended to be

more integrationist. These groups adhered to a Black Nationalist agenda; they were intent on asserting Black control over Black issues, and crucially they wanted to assert their difference to the White community. Previously there was a more universalist approach to civil rights issues, emphasising that all races should be treated the same. The non-violent, integrated civil rights movement began to splinter near the end of the 1960s though, when there was immense frustration at the lack of real progress for the African-American community.

Out of this frustration, which is typified by events such as the race riots that occurred in cities across America in the late 1960s, grew movements that were more violent, militaristic and separatist. While previously a book on the ills of slavery by a White historian would have been thought of as making a positive contribution to the plight of African-Americans, there was a abrupt paradigm shift in consciousness about the propriety of representing Otherness which took place in the late 1960s which left little room for such involvement, as it was argued by many of the new African-American leaders that this was simply a more benevolent form of oppression. Novick discusses this development, saying that even those historians who were most supportive of the Black liberation movement were subject to the radicals' anger:

Kenneth Stampp was told by militants that, as a White man, he had no right to write The Peculiar Institution. Herbert Gutman, presenting a paper to the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, was shouted down Gutman pleaded to no avail that he was "extremely supportive of the Black liberation movement – if people would just forget that I am White and hear what I am saying . . . [it] would lend support to the . . . movement." (475)

Obviously, the radicals felt that it was impossible for Whites to make a valuable contribution to Black history, regardless of their ideological stance. Whites were still in control of the chronicling of Black history, where African-Americans argued they should be representing their own history. The crossover between this period of White liberal involvement in civil rights to the more separatist stance of the late 1960s and 1970s can be seen in the early period of the release of Nat Turner, where Styron was heralded by an historically Black university for attempting to bring the two races closer together, and just a short time later was facing severe criticism for skewing his representation of Nat Turner to fit his White racist ideology.

This tension between the historical profession and cultural politics gained momentum in 1960s America, and similar issues were still being worked out with regard to the appropriation of Maori history in 1980s New Zealand. Pakeha historian Michael King, who had written probably the most widely read and highly regarded history on historical and biographical studies of Maori, quickly lost his authority to speak in and on behalf of the Maori community, as the greater authenticity of Maori history written by Maori became emphasised. In her article “Who Can Write as Other?” Marjory Fee briefly examines this issue, explaining that:

. . . two of [King’s] publications in 1983 received an unusually negative response from Maori critics, including [Witi] Ihimaera, a former ally: they felt such work should be done from within their community. [King’s] response: “Nobody would answer what seemed to me to be the most relevant question: would anything be different in the book . . . if it had been written by a Maori? I doubted it”. . . . King seems oblivious of one thing (at least) that is different: Maori reception of his work. Context matters, and a work’s reception becomes part of its meaning. His refusal to face a

changing reality, especially since his own success had been founded on the goodwill and cooperation of the Maori community, seems insensitive at best. (25-26)

The same problem of lack of authority and authenticity – lacking the right to speak – haunted William Styron in 1960s America. While it could be argued that the necessity for authenticity is not as vital in a novel, because the purpose is to imaginatively enter other lives, one of the traditional qualities of a good novelist is the ability to create an authentic voice. Styron then necessarily places a value on creating an authentic voice for Nat Turner, in particular because he does speak with Nat's voice in the novel. He does not rely on a White narrator to negate the demands for an authentic Black voice. He also puts more pressure on the idea of authenticity than there possibly would be for an ordinary novel because he is writing an historical novel. Turner as an historical figure lived a life that exists in record. To claim imaginative ownership of that life is to impose one's own view of the meaning of the life on the bare facts of the record. It is also to enter into an arena in which various claims compete for ownership of the meaning of that life, not only in its own time but in the present. Because Styron is utilising the history of African-Americans it seems only fair that they should expect authenticity and accuracy from him, yet at the same time their view of his life is based upon their own ideological preoccupations and purposes. The community feel that because Nat Turner was African-American, their view of him is more accurate or should have more weight.

Fee's analysis of Michael King's response to changing Maori attitudes about Whites writing their history – that the Maori response would have been different had the work been written by a Maori – raises the issue of how the author affects the reception of the novel, which is of significant relevance to the Nat Turner controversy. The fact that Styron is a White Southerner *does* alter the reception of the novel, it is obviously of

relevance to the different reading communities that his novel affected, because as Fee explained, “context matters” and, I would add, culture matters. Styron himself has commented on this, observing that James Baldwin said to him that “if you were just darker, it would be you, not me, who was the most famous Black writer in America” (qtd. in “Revisited”). While he is certainly right in suggesting the reception of the novel would have been different had Styron been Black, it is hard to imagine that Nat Turner would have been received without controversy. One only needs to examine the difficulty that African-American women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison had when they first wrote novels which dealt with difficult issues of stereotype and sexuality. Although valued members of the African-American community now, they faced harsh criticism when they first published, as the African-American community were still very much focussed on maintaining a literature which promoted positive representations of the race. The question is intriguing precisely because the author’s race does affect how the book is received. In an essay on the Maori Renaissance Mark Williams refers to a discussion on this topic by African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, in which:

Gates describes a wager between a Black jazz musician, Roy Eldridge, and the music critic, Leonard Feather, that Eldridge could distinguish Black musicians from White ones — blindfolded. When Feather dropped the needle onto a selection of records, however, “more than half the time Eldridge guessed wrong.” The lesson Gates draws from this is not that “our social identities don’t matter” or that our histories as individuals or groups do not “affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write,” but that “that relation is never one of fixed determinism.” (Williams 222-23)

This problem of cultural authority and authenticity is also a problem that was concerning many White historians at the time when Styron’s novel was released. This

may account for the overwhelmingly positive reviews that Styron received from many White historians. Indeed, one of Styron's most ardent supporters, highly respected historian C. Vann Woodward, called Styron's Nat Turner "the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature" (173). The imperfect research by Styron and the omissions or selection of history that occurred in his novel were roundly ignored or defended by White historians, for whom the binarised climate of race discussion in the United States meant they felt placed between equally untenable positions. As discussed earlier in the chapter, at this time historians felt their profession was under threat from the cultural wars that questioned their right to speak if they did not have the authority of the community.

However, they also felt under threat from historical novelists, such as Styron himself, because the widespread popularity of fiction over history meant that novelists were having "a much greater influence than historians do . . . on popular conceptions of the past" (Current 77). If history were to be looked at simply as a story told by its winners or losers, always imbued with the cultural perspective of the historian who writes it – as was increasingly thought to be the case – then maybe readers of history would rather read historical novels than traditional history books. As Herbert Aptheker is quoted as saying in John Henrik Clarke's Introduction to Ten Black Writers Respond "History's potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalisation and legitimacy" (vii). In making their choice it would seem that White historians sided with Styron, no matter how suspect the history, as protecting their right to speak was obviously seen as more urgent than discrediting the form of the historical novel. It should also be recognized from an equally suspect reading of history Black commentators maintained their anti-Styron position. For both White historians and Black

commentators, history appears to serve a purpose in the present which is stronger than their allegiance to its actuality in the past.

One of the major reasons the new Black Nationalist movements were dedicated to promoting Black ownership of Black history was so that they could project a history that African-Americans could feel proud of and that would in a sense renovate both their historical and contemporary image, for themselves and for America at large. Black Nationalists wished to change the image of African-Americans from that of the Sambo slave and subservient Friday, to one more akin to the murderous slave rebellion leader Nat Turner. This can be seen in the way the civil rights movement changed from being based on ideals of non-violence and peaceful protest, working with Whites, to a more militant movement which viewed all Whites as the enemy, in much the same way as all Whites were killed in the Nat Turner rebellion, be they masters or babies.

Much of this attempted image renovation for African-Americans in the 1960s became tied to the idea of rebellion in slavery times. The history of slave rebellion in the United States appeared to be considerably different to that in the rest of the continent and the Caribbean islands. There was a more explicit rebellion culture within the slave societies of the Caribbean and South America. The fact that not many slaves openly rebelled in the United States was taken by some as a sign of weakness in the face of oppression. The impact that this historical legacy left on the image of African-Americans was not conducive to creating a powerful, effective resistance to the current oppression being felt by them in the 1960s. To combat this negative legacy there were studies that concentrated on the previously unknown revolts or more subtle types of rebellion used by slaves in the United States, such as running away or infanticide. Herbert Aptheker's American Negro Slave Revolts was one of the first of these. This desire to promote a history of rebellion in African-American culture also made those slaves that had very

openly and successfully rebelled in a more traditional manner all the more important within the Black psyche at this point in history. Groups such as Black Power used a figure like Nat Turner as an example of an historical legacy of rebellion against oppression. The Confessions of Nat Turner, written by a White Southerner, whose grandfather was a slave owner, and who presumed to speak with the voice of a Black man, was diametrically opposed to the position of Black Nationalists at the time. This was exacerbated by Styron's characterisation of Nat which was the very antithesis of how the Black Power movement had been portraying him, in their use of him as a symbol of fighting the oppressor.

Styron's Nat: A Problematic Characterisation

The responses and points of interest of the earlier, overwhelmingly White reviews are markedly different from those by Black reviewers, in particular those in Clarke's Ten Black Writers Respond. In this section of the chapter, I will examine the responses to the characterisation of Nat Turner – in particular, those elements of his character as created by Styron which proved so problematic for African-American reviewers – but also briefly look at the differences between them and what White reviewers highlighted as problems in Styron's characterisation. I will also briefly examine the portrayals of other characters in the novel which also proved problematic for reviewers.

It is particularly revealing to note that the early White reviewers made virtually no mention of the elements of the characterisation of Nat which proved so problematic to the Black reviewers. While it is certain that the White reviewers were aware of the potential problems of Styron as a White man attempting to write the character of a Black slave in the first person, there was little acknowledgement of the part stereotyping might play in the

creation of and response to the characterisation of Styron's Nat. The major problem identified by the White reviewers in regard to Styron's characterisation of Nat – if there were any problems identified at all – was the language that Nat uses in the novel. It is this quest for the “authentic voice” of the slave that was the main concern of the White reviewers.

In his review of Nat Turner, Melvin J. Friedman explains that there are three distinct voices of the character of Nat. There is a sharp difference between the language of Nat's interior monologue that narrates the story to the reader and the language he uses with his fellow slaves and with Whites (these latter two are also distinct). While most White reviewers accepted the dialect in which Nat speaks to his fellow slaves as authentic or at least appropriate, it is the authenticity of the interior language-scape of Nat that was queried by the White reviewers. Nat's internal narratives include passages such as this:

Likewise, just as this building possesses neither doors nor windows, it seems to have no purpose, resembling, as I say, a temple – yet a temple in which no one worships, or a sarcophagus in which no one lies buried, or a monument to something mysterious, ineffable, and without name. But as is my custom whenever I have this dream or vision, I don't dwell upon the meaning of the strange building standing so lonely and remote upon its ocean promontory, for it seems by its very purposelessness to be endowed with a profound mystery which to explore would yield only a profusion of darker and perhaps more troubling mysteries, as in a maze. (Nat Turner 6)

As Friedman explains, a number of the early reviewers were disconcerted “that Styron has turned over the narration to a quasi-educated Negro slave and has bestowed on him the mature power of Styron's own rhetoric” (67 Friedman). The implied and often explicit

comment was that a Black slave would not have had command of such elevated, intellectual language.

Yet, this rich interior language might be seen as one of the strengths of the novel, and indeed there was little objection from the ten Black writers that Styron did not confine himself to using more demotic language when writing the interior monologue of Nat. They, like Styron, respected Nat's education and intellect. Friedman states in defence of Styron's elevated language, writers such as Flaubert, James, Proust and Faulkner use "[their] own elaborate syntax and richly suggestive language even though [they] frequently turned over the point of view to characters whose mentalities were scarcely capable of manipulating these verbal effects" (68 Friedman). The richness of Nat's internal language allows the creation of a more complex character and a more developed expression of the environment in which he lives. Nat engages the reader on multiple levels through his language shifts. Styron is well known for his love of complicated language, and it would have been a huge shift for him to write the novel purely in simple language or in slave idiom. This would have resulted in a novel that was even more patronising and infuriating to the Black community, if he felt he had to lower his level of writing significantly to represent the interior world of a slave.

While the language of Nat in Styron's novel was a considerable area of debate and discussion in the early reviews of the novel, the parts of the novel that proved so contentious to the Black writers often remained unmentioned or unrecognised by the White reviewers. It was almost as if they had no understanding that there were elements of this characterisation that would prove inflammatory. Though this lack of comprehension of the insensitive nature of Styron's depiction may seem unimaginable to many readers now, and while much of the misapprehension was caused by a complete lack of empathy with Black readers, there is an explanation for the disparity in understanding between

White reviewers and Black reviewers in 1967. It was not just Styron's novel itself, but also its reception that was caught up in the struggle in the United States over culture and its relation to authority, politics, history and literature. In the relatively short period between the novel's release and that of Ten Black Writers Respond cultural attitudes in the United States turned so irrevocably and so generally that henceforth any novel with such inflammatory characterisations as those in Nat Turner would be recognised as offensive by White reviewers as well as Black.

The most controversial element of the characterisation of Nat, which has retained its potency from the novel's release until now, is that of sexuality. Styron's psychological understanding of Nat as a rebel leader was partly based on his reading of Erik Erikson's Young Man Luther (1959), where Styron thought it "amazing that Martin Luther . . . was an ascetic, a monk, and it wasn't until after his revolution that he got married suddenly and had a large family" (qtd. in Duff and Mitchell 116). He therefore believed that Nat's sexual life had a lot to do with his position as a rebel leader and, as such, Nat's sexual life is a major element of the novel. The most controversial and shocking element of Nat's sexuality as portrayed by Styron is the inclusion of rape fantasies. While of course there could be no historical confirmation as to whether Turner was visited by such fantasies, the characterising of Turner in such a way says more about Styron's novelistic preoccupations with obsessive male sexuality than it does about Turner.

In Sophie's Choice, Styron presents the character of Stingo as sexually obsessed with Sophie, and capable of taking advantage of her fragile emotional state to enable the consummation of those desires. Indeed, the rebellion was notable for its *lack* of sexual aggression by the rebels, as there was no mention of rape anywhere in the historical record. In the novel, Styron examines the place of rape in the rebellion by having Nat expressly tell his men not to rape for reasons of practicality in that it would waste time better spent

continuing the rebellion in earnest. Rather than being motivated by racist stereotypes, the fact that Nat must forbid rape during the rebellion could be construed as indicating that in a situation where social prohibition against rebellion and murder have been so overturned, the proscriptions against sexual violence are likely to be correspondingly weakened.

Although Nat never actually rapes anyone in the novel, he does fantasise about the act a number of times. As with all his sexual fantasies, it is always White women who are the focus of such desires. The historical and contemporary sensitivities related to this depiction of Nat as a man who desires to rape are overwhelming. It is worth noting, however, that the only man who does actually commit rape in the novel is a White man, the Irish overseer McBride who rapes Nat's mother. This passage is also cause for serious concern from the ten Black writers, as they believe Styron has depicted Nat's mother as enjoying the rape. This scene will be dealt with more closely later in the chapter. The only other suggestion of rape is introduced by way of the pastor who constantly attempts to rape Nat once he is his master, although Nat manages to fend him off.

Returning to the particularities of Nat's rape fantasies, it is significant that there was no critical engagement with these scenes in the early reviews of the novel by White reviewers. Whether the reviewers were simply unaware of the sensitivities of this depiction or whether they felt it was a natural and necessary element of the characterisation of a slave or Black male is unknown. Should such a novel be released now written by a White Southerner that depicts a Black man fantasising about raping women, in particular White women, there would be a severe reaction to the novel from both sides of the racial divide. The issue of Black sexuality, particularly the relationship between Black men and White women is surrounded by a long legacy of stereotyping. Black men were often lynched after reports of sex with White women; whether consensual or not, such acts were usually considered rape. There is also an enduring perception of

Black men desiring White women because they have traditionally been unattainable. The presentation of White women as sexually pure and chaste was in contrast to the depiction of Black women as sexually voracious jezebels. Black men were often characterised as “black-beast-rapists,” a stereotype still potent in American society.⁷ For Styron, a White Southerner, to present a Black male as having fantasies about violently raping White women was not just controversial but seemingly deliberately provocative. The portrayal is even more insensitive because Nat Turner was increasingly being used by Black Power as a hero of rebellion. It can come as no surprise that the Black community was outraged at the depiction. One imagines there would be similar outrage if a Black novelist wrote about a White hero in the overtly sexualised manner that Styron wrote about Nat Turner: “[t]he English Americanist Marcus Cunliffe, discussing the Black outcry against the book, doubted whether, even 170 years after his death, ‘Americans would be indifferent to a description of George Washington in the act of masturbation’” (Novick 474). Yet, this does not acknowledge the more powerful position that Styron assumes by being White, and the more powerful nature of the stereotypes pertaining to Black sexuality. The White community could more easily ignore such a representation by a Black author.

It may be Styron’s belief that he was showing Nat Turner in a positive way by not having him act upon his violent desires, or allowing his followers to do so during the rebellion. This, however, confirmed the view that Black men were by nature subject to such desires. It may be that Styron simply believes that all men have such desires, and it is not until they are in a position of power that they can choose to enact those desires or not. The rape of Nat’s mother by the Irish overseer McBride could demonstrate this, as McBride certainly uses his power to fulfil his sexual desires where Nat does not. In Styron’s novel, Nat secretly witnesses the rape of his mother when he is a young boy. While it is a White man doing the raping of a Black woman here, the passage was still very

controversial, as the ten Black writers believed Styron was showing that Nat's mother enjoyed the rape, the passage is as follows:

“Gwan outa here!” my mother cries, “Gwan away! I ain’t havin’ no truck with you!” Her voice is shrill, angry, but edged with fear, and I can no longer understand the words as she moves to another part of the room above Again my mother says something, insistent, still touched with fear, but her voice is blotted out by the man’s grumble, louder now, almost a roar. Suddenly my mother’s voice is like a moan, a single long plaintive wail across the morning silence, making my scalp tingle . . . [a broken bottle] clutched in McBride’s hand and flourished like a dagger at my mother’s neck All at once a kind of shudder passes through my mother’s body, and the moan is a different moan, tinged with urgency, and I don’t not know whether the sound I hear now is the merest whisper of a giggle (“Uh-huh, aw-*right*,” she seems to murmur) . . . her brown long legs go up swiftly to embrace his waist, the two of them now joined and moving in that same strange and brutal rhythm I have witnessed with Wash through the crack of half a dozen cabins and which in the madness of complete innocence I had thought was the pastime, or habit, or obsession, or something, of niggers alone. (143-45)

This passage is certainly very complicated in the way it presents its victim. The characterisation of McBride is simply one of a threatening drunken brute, but Nat’s mother goes from fearful victim to an almost willing participant. After the attack Nat hears his mother return to her singing “unperturbed and serene as before” (147).

It would seem that this scene is part of Styron’s attempt to show not just the difficult reality of slavery, but the problematic nature of sexual abuse, where victims are

often made to feel culpable themselves for their involvement in the act. This process of making the reader interrogate their perception of guilt and innocence, and complicating his presentation of victims is a technique that Styron also uses in Sophie's Choice in his portrayal of Sophie. So while Nat's mother certainly does not welcome the advances from McBride – in fact he needs to physically threaten her life with a broken bottle at her neck to rape her – there does seem to be a suggestion by Styron that she gains some sexual pleasure from the rape. This forces the reader to contemplate their notion of a victim. There are numerous responses to this passage, where it could be deemed extremely offensive that Styron shows her enjoying the rape, as it was by the ten Black writers. Obviously there are readers who will have their stereotypical views of Black women and women in general confirmed and no longer consider Nat's mother a victim. For me, any fleeting sexual pleasure she may gain does not alter the fact that she was a victim of sexual abuse, it simply highlights one of the ways in which sexual abuse victims are made to feel shame and culpability for events of which they are not to blame. Nat's mother's quick return to normality after the attack is a useful way for Styron to show the regularity of such sexual advantage being taken of slave women, and how she must react this way to cope with regular abuse. Although it is often useful for novelists to give readers the space to make their own interpretations, in this case there is perhaps too much opportunity for readers to revert to stereotypical thinking, or alternatively assume that Styron was doing so. Such a complex presentation of an extremely sensitive issue deserved more space in the novel if it was to be truly successful and not just merely be offensive.

This being one of the major formative influences in Nat's sexual life, it is little wonder that Nat has such a problematic sex life in Styron's novel. Not only does Nat have fantasies of raping White women – fantasies that he never realises in any way – he has no desire for sexual relations with Black women in the novel either. He never has fantasises

about them and never thinks about them in a sexual way at all. In fact the only time Black women are mentioned at the novel at all is when Nat is at the market and starts to gain a following from the other slaves. Slave women are briefly mentioned as objects of desire for the male slaves gathered at the market, as they “. . . ogle the passing bottoms and breasts of the Negro girls of the town, jabbering the while loudly about poontang and pussy . . . [o]ne or two succeeded with the girls and stole off with them into a field of alfalfa” (296). Nat himself never indicates that he partakes in this at all or has any desire to. The ten Black writers complain that the only time Black women are presented they are shown as whores, and yet, it is questionable as to whether this is racially motivated.

Styron seems to present most of the women in his novels as sexual objects, regardless of race. It seems his portrayal of women is determined by a Madonna/Whore complex, whereby almost all the women in Nat Turner, regardless of race, are presented as sexually voracious, with the exception of the pure, chaste Margaret Whitehead. In Sophie's Choice, Sophie is the sexual obsession of both Nathan and Stingo. The characterisation of Nat as only interested in White women was particularly galling for Black reviewers, as they claimed that Styron had not only ignored “the fact that Nat Turner had a wife whom he dearly loved” (Clarke vii) – although the historical record is not definite in this respect – but he had even removed any trace of desire towards Black women at all.

The only sexual acts that Nat actually experiences in William Styron's version of him, is masturbation, and one homosexual encounter with an adolescent boy. Any representation of homosexuality at this time was bound to be controversial, but the taboo on homosexuality in the Black community was particularly strong; as Paula Giddings observes, there was little chance for a sexual revolution in the African-American community when they were so busy striving for civil rights (462). Henry Louis Gates explains that the hostility towards Styron by “Black intellectuals came at the height of

Black Power, of the super-macho, super-stud Black Panthers, with their guns, leather, and berets. Styron's version of Nat Turner was simply unreadable to these people, and they didn't want a White to write about it, particularly in that way" (qtd. in Horowitz 84). His belief is that such a vision of Nat Turner was never going to work with the image that was being projected by Black Power at the time of the novel's release.

Another example of how Styron's characterisation of Nat did not engage with the ideology of the Black Power movement was his presentation of Nat as a leader in the rebellion. Styron showed Nat to be somewhat overwhelmed with the bloodshed of the rebellion and unable to personally participate in the killing, except that of Margaret Whitehead. Styron said he decided to do this as he found it significant that in Gray's "Confessions" Turner would always explain that he could not strike the fatal blow because the "sword was dull" (106) or that he "never got to the houses . . . until the murders were [already] committed" (108). Styron began to develop a story from this where Nat was unable to kill anyone except for Margaret Whitehead, the object of his desire. In Styron's novel the job of killing soon rests mostly on Will's shoulders, who is characterised as a violent sadist, another characterisation that the ten Black writers were unhappy with, believing that Styron only showed stereotypical extremes. Will had been treated very poorly by his master, however, and his violence may be seen as Styron's way of showing his response to that abuse. The ten Black writers argued that the failure of Nat as a leader was a veiled attempt by Styron to show that the current leaders of the Black Power rebellion would also fail. Because of the times, a characterisation of Nat as a vicious, ruthless killer of the Whites who oppressed him would have been much preferred over the Nat that Styron depicted, an intellectual and a great organiser of the rebellion but unable to bring himself to kill.

Many of the ten Black writers also expressed anger at Styron's depiction of "benevolent" slave owners. In particular, Nat's first owner, Samuel Turner is characterised in this way. He looks upon Nat as something of a project, teaching him to read and allowing him into the house. The ten Black writers believed this was showing slavery as a benign institution. They also felt this way about the Sambo slave characterisation – evident most notably in Hark – because "the happy-go-lucky, boot-licking, irresponsible, ambitionless slave" that the Sambo represented was part of "that Southern folklore presented as proof that Blacks were incapable of responsible citizenship" (Duff and Mitchell 115). However, it can be argued that these characterisations were not meant to show slavery as benign, but to show it as a diverse but fundamentally inhuman institution. There were good masters and bad masters but they were all essentially masters of a corrupt system in the end. The psychological effects of slavery were all devastating, but they were varied. Because he had a benevolent master, Nat became isolated from his fellow slaves and was in a no-man's land where he could not fit in completely with Whites or Blacks. It is Styron's belief that it was often benevolence that was most damaging to the slave, a view he said he derived from the slave writings of Frederick Douglass, "who repeatedly asserted that kind treatment intensified rather than lessened the slave's desire for freedom" (Gross and Bender 510), as it reminded them that they were human and made the inhumanity of their lives harder to bear. Styron believed that the Sambo character of slaves did exist, but that is certainly not the only effect of slavery on the minds of men we see in the novel. Will, Hark and Nat present very different types of characters produced by different types of masters. What Styron may be attempting to show is the diversity of slavery, that there were many different types of masters and many different types of slaves caused by the psychological strain of slavery. By showing this he is not presenting it as a benign institution, he is simply showing that presenting a more diverse

picture of slavery allows us a deeper understanding of its impact on slaves, masters and those that came after them.

* * *

William Styron's Nat Turner: Success or Failure?

In the final part of this chapter, I wish to examine the overall success of the novel Nat Turner, to examine its literary purpose, both intended and unintended, and its effect on its audiences. This section is where the wider issues raised in this thesis will be examined in regard to Styron's novel. These issues, which I place under the umbrella term of "the right to speak," involve the purpose of literature, its relation to culture, race, ethnicity and community, in both its production and its reception. I will also examine the way in which White liberalism impacted upon the writing of this novel and its reception, and how this is an early example of the limits of White liberalism to cope with the specific demands and needs of minority groups and multicultural audiences, as was discussed with regard to the Mohammed cartoon controversy in the Introduction to this thesis.

Nat Turner undoubtedly became such a controversial novel because of the context into which it was released. The particular context of the late sixties, with its developing and increasingly volatile identity and cultural politics was an atmosphere in which the novel was bound to become a site of contestation. The novel was in many ways an epicentre of all the issues that were being raised at the time it was released. The burgeoning Black Power movement, political assassinations, the death of Martin Luther King Junior, the politicisation of Black history and the increasing militancy of Black politics; combined with the particular attributes of the author – White, Southern, liberal,

grandson of a slave owner, member of the White literary establishment – and the content of the novel itself – slavery, rebellion, inter-racial sex, homosexuality – created a situation where the novel was always going to be controversial. Yet, even though we are now almost forty years from the time of its release, the novel still retains its potency, for both its readers and its critics. It is telling that in 1994 a discussion forum was set up by a public radio station in the United States. The debate that resulted from that discussion, however, reiterated much the same arguments and grievances that arose in the late 1960s (Greenberg 31). It would seem that while there was obviously a paradigm shift which took place in the time that it took Styron to write then release the novel, a subsequent paradigm shift has not yet taken place, one which accepts the right to speak for any novelist.

This idea of a “paradigm shift” is imperative to understanding the place from which the novel and its subsequent notoriety, developed. There are elements in the novel, such as Nat’s homosexual experience, which must have been recognised as inflammatory by Styron. This element of Styron’s characterisation of Nat, and indeed all the elements of his characterisation of Nat’s sexual life should not have surprised Styron in the way they provoked outcry from the Black community. However, Styron did not set out to deliberately inflame Black readers, he was subject to a complete shift in attitudes and tolerance between his conceiving the novel and its publication. The wish to create a controversial novel was there from the start, as suggested by his continuation of challenging literature with Sophie’s Choice. Not only was Styron again challenging the idea of the right to speak in writing a novel on the experiences of a Holocaust survivor as a non-Jew, he specifically challenges the political and cultural constraints placed on creative freedom through his characterisation of Sophie. She is a non-Jew and just like Nat’s mother, she is not portrayed as simply a victim. The lines of guilt and innocence and extremely blurred in the novel. After the hostile reaction to Nat Turner, one might have

assumed that Styron would be more circumspect about engaging with such a controversial subject. Styron obviously wants his literature to be part of an important dialogue between dominant and minority groups, about issues of importance, about art.

While Nat Turner is by no means a complete success, it does attempt to engage readers (and in many cases non-readers) in a dialogue about cultural politics and their place in the creation of literature. Ultimately, it appears that Styron wants the reader to have some agency, and therefore some responsibility towards the text. As a novelist, Styron wishes to represent but not resolve the issues he raises, leaving the reader to negotiate their way through their own discomforts. Nat Turner is a novel of limited success according to the criteria by which I assess it. Though it could be said that the novel stimulated debate and dialogue about important cultural and literary issues through its controversial style and content, it is in reality so controversial that the result is a virtual impasse to dialogue. It comes down to the fundamentals of what constitutes successful debate: that the two opposing sides can express their differing views, but that there is a chance for some common ground to develop; that each side come a little closer to understanding the other's motivations, if not resulting in complete understanding. Yet, in many of the cases that concern the right to speak, this often does not happen. This can be illustrated by the Mohammed cartoon controversy. The principles regarding the depiction of Mohammed are so strongly held, so intrinsically tied to the very identities of many Muslims that there is no room for compromise to protect the sanctity of freedom of the press. Yet on the other side, it is also a fundamental belief of White liberalism that freedom of the press is a necessary tool in freeing the oppressed; its sanctity must be maintained. These two opposing sides are so entrenched within their own belief systems that there is no room for understanding the other side. Effective debate as I have described it earlier in this paragraph cannot occur.

A similar impasse has resulted with regard to Styron's Nat Turner. While the debate could be considered somewhat successful in the early period of the novel's release – demonstrated by the large amount of reviews, letters and the publishing of Clarke's collection of essays creating a strong dialogue between the two opposing sides – the opportunity for that to occur, particularly at a grassroots readers level, has lessened over time. Styron expressed dismay at a New York Times Book Review interview with African-American writer Paule Marshall in the mid-1980s, where writers were asked to name "Books I Never Finished Reading . . ." and Styron quotes Marshall as "saying that she never even started reading The Confessions of Nat Turner, since she had been assured that the work was 'racist'" (Styron "Revisited"). This indicates that the novel has developed such a negative reputation within the Black community that she felt it was too offensive to bother reading. Styron also goes on to explain that he had ". . . ample evidence of Nat Turner's being not only unread by Blacks but in perpetual quarantine. This came from reports filtering back to [him] from Black studies programmes in the years up to the present. Several times [he] learned the dismal news that in specific courses Ten Black Writers Respond would be required reading while The Confessions of Nat Turner was not listed" ("Revisited"). One of the apparent problems here is that Styron believes above all in the rationality of the reader and the public role of fiction. Yet, with issues which are of such importance to a group there is not a rational response. The response occurs on a more visceral level, and removes the possibility for successful debate, particularly at the popular reading level but often even within the intellectual sphere. A successful debate of the merits or failures of the novel and the issues it raises can never really take place if the novel is not being read by one party to the debate.

What these two instances appear to demonstrate is a feeling of such offence in the Black community about the novel, that it has essentially been erased from their

consciousness altogether. There is no room in the Black community for this novel, it is simply not being read by them. A similar situation developed with respect to Salman Rushdie's novel Satanic Verses, where there was a vehement Muslim reaction to it, yet those burning the books and rioting in protest had in most cases not even read the novel. This of course means that contemporary debate about Styron's Nat Turner was unfeasible, as the overwhelming majority of the Black community had shut down the opportunity for discussion, at least at a popular level. The possibility of creating a dialogue about important cultural and literary issues was thwarted by the overwhelming offence caused to the Black community by the novel. Whatever success the novel had enjoyed within the White community, seems to be mirrored by an equally unsuccessful history in the Black community. This ultimately creates a situation for anger and misinformed arguments rather than effective debate about the issues.

While I acknowledge that the novel's cultural representations are flawed, particularly in its failure to grasp the sensitivities of the Black community, Nat Turner is not by any means a complete failure. Styron has managed to carve out an almost unique position for himself in his ability to create discomfort for the White reader about what they are reading. This feeling of discomfort created by Styron in Nat Turner has persisted since the release of the novel in 1967, indeed the level of discomfort and interrogation felt by White readers has only increased as their awareness of the problematic nature of the novel has expanded. Styron's novel's central achievement is to position the White reader so that they are put into a condition of subconscious collaboration with the White characters of the novel. There is also a feeling of collusion with regard to the particular version of Nat and other characters that Styron has created in the novel. These are White stereotypes about slaves specifically and African-Americans generally that are being both substantiated and challenged in the depiction of the characters. Nat is at once both a deeply intelligent,

articulate leader of rebellion yet is also depicted as having desires to embody the “black-beast-rapist” stereotype, fantasising about raping White women. Descriptions of the murders are ruthless and bloody:

I saw Will’s arm go skyward, all back resistless sinew, and come down, go up again, and down, up and down once more, then he jumped backward and away, parted company with this companion he had so intimately clasped, and it was at that instant that Travis’s head, gushing blood from a matrix of pulpy crimson flesh, rolled from his neck and fell to the floor with a single bounce, then lay still. The headless body, night-shirted, slid down the wall with a faint hissing sound and collapsed in a pile of skinny shanks, elbows, knobby knees. Blood deluged the room in a foaming sacrament. (379)

One finds they cannot help but be disgusted or flinch at such descriptions, and yet there is also the knowledge of the horror of slavery that has induced such acts. Is it really ethical to feel sorry for those Whites (who include women, children and babies) that face the wrath of the slaves? Is it not a hell of their own making? The presentation of the killings as sparing no one because no White is innocent also then indicts the White reader. What about those slave owners who are portrayed as “benevolent masters?” Are they just unwilling participants in an already existent way of life? Yet, are we really meant to feel compassion for them? Should they be spared? It is these discomforting questions of guilt and blame that put the White reader in such a difficult position when reading the book, forcing them to question their own beliefs and their own responsibility for the suffering of the oppressed.⁸

There is also the problematic representation of Nat and the rest of the Black characters in the novel. The White reader knows that this is a controversial and dangerous characterisation to make in the novel: a Black hero presented as a homosexual, sexually

confused, rape fantasiser. Does Styron have the right to say this? Does he not understand the stereotypes and history that go into these descriptions and make the problematic? This presentation of Nat does make the White reader acutely aware of those connotations around sexuality that are so powerfully associated with Black men and women. There are images in the novel which remain shocking. The problem with the success of this novel is the self-interrogation which Styron creates for the White reader through this controversial presentation – by writing things which are deliberately inflammatory, by making them question their own culpability in the legacy of slavery – is unreadable to the Black reader. The novel does not work for the Black reader, as such interrogation is of no use to the Black community.

Yet while Styron's novel brings about such reactions from White liberal readers, it also highlights the difference between liberal ideology and reality. White liberalism places itself firmly on the side of the oppressed, believing that the principles of liberalism can create a culturally egalitarian society. Yet, White liberals have no more right to identify with the oppressed and believe that they know what is best for them than William Styron has a right to speak from the position of a Black slave. The fact is White liberals often have no perceived authority by those they view as oppressed, there are limits to how far they can really identify with the oppressed because they themselves are not oppressed, they are instead part of the oppressive culture. The principles that are important to White liberals, the principles they believe will free the oppressed, are often too far removed from what the oppressed actually want, what principles are important to them. Styron's novel demonstrates the inability of the White liberal to truly identify with the oppressed in an authentic way, particularly at the point that the novel was released.

It may be that in the time it was presented, the things that occur now for the reader of the novel did not occur, or were not discussed in the reviews. Instead, there was a focus

on the historical accuracy of the novel, on the stylistic content of the novel. In fact, White critics did not discuss the problematic representations of the novel which proved so irksome to the Black community until the Black critics brought it up. If the novel was thought to be successful it was because it made the “horrors of slavery” apparent. Black critics have a reason to question why it is that a novel – the purpose of which is to present the horrors of slavery – must necessarily show Nat Turner as having homosexual tendencies, why it must show him fantasising about rape, why it must depict benevolent masters. It is not really necessary to show this to demonstrate the horrors of slavery. If Styron was simply wishing to write a novel which demonstrated the horrors of slavery, none of these controversial depictions were necessary.

In my revisionist reading of the novel I think it has an important purpose: to show the White reader their own prejudices, their own culpability, make them interrogate their thoughts and beliefs and position on slavery, beyond the more simplistic “horror of slavery” position. Undoubtedly we all recognise the horror of slavery, yet it is important to acknowledge that there is a wider range of feelings related to slavery, which in some respect depends on your race. Feelings of culpability and guilt are feelings particular to White people with regard to slavery. Nat Turner provides a way to elicit, interrogate and destabilise those feelings. This effect of destabilisation does not occur for the Black reader, however. The limited audience of this book is one of the failures of it as a novel. Perhaps Styron was incapable of creating a novel that affected both audiences in a productive way, or perhaps the times prevented this.

Nat Turner in this way is very similar to Sophie’s Choice. Styron, whether intentionally or simply as a result of his position, writes most pertinently for people in his own situation. In Sophie’s Choice, it is the position of a person outside the Holocaust experience, trying to make sense of it, trying to understand their fascination with one of the

most horrific events in human history. There is little in the novel for Holocaust survivors or for those who are deeply connected to the experience of the Holocaust, just as there seems to be little in Nat Turner for a Black audience. This is Styron's failure in writing the novel. It does not negate his right to speak, however. He is doing something important. For those Whites who are trying to make sense of their position in regard to the legacy of slavery, who are related to it through their belonging to the White hegemonic culture, but who always like to claim some distance from it, it is a useful book. It makes them interrogate their fascination with Black sexuality, Black stereotype, ideas of benevolence, and requires a more complex response from the reader than just acknowledging the horror of slavery. Styron is testing his readers and testing the limits of literature. He is attempting to create a space in literature which acknowledges the right of the novelist to imaginatively enter any life. The trade-off of this appears to be that such work may be untranslatable to a different set of audience – to those that question his right to speak. By writing as the Other, he is not claiming the Black experience as his own, but he is using it to speak to the dominant reader. It is a new way to reach them, a new way to interrogate them.

Chapter 3: “A Familiar Strangeness”: Interpreting the Experience of the Other in
 Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses

By “cosmopolitans,” I meant those writers Western reviewers seemed to be choosing as the interpreters and authentic public voices of the Third World – writers who, in a sense, allowed a flirtation with change that ensured continuity, a familiar strangeness, a trauma by inches. Alien to the public that read them because they were Black, spoke with accents or were not citizens, they were also like that public in tastes, training, repertoire of anecdotes, current habitation.

– Timothy Brennan Salman Rushdie and the Third World viii – ix.

Salman Rushdie, along with writers such as Isabel Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Derek Walcott are what Timothy Brennan, in a famous 1989 formulation, termed “cosmopolitans.” They are the “literary celebrities” (Brennan viii) of the Third World who, by way of both selection and volunteering have become representatives of their countries, their people, their culture and their “world” for the West. These writers are the designated interpreters of the Third World because readers in the West recognise them as Other and are intrigued by that Otherness; Western readers want the cosmopolitans to interpret their foreign worlds and cultures, ostensibly so that they may understand them. The inherent problem with this is that although these cosmopolitan writers certainly inhabit a different world from their Western readers, they also occupy a space and culture that is in many cases quite removed from that which readers presume they are interpreting. While Salman Rushdie undoubtedly has a far greater understanding of India, Pakistan, Islam and “the East” than most of his Western readers, it is also true that he was educated

mostly in the British education system and has resided in the West for most of his adult life. While he is familiar with that which is strange and Other to Western readers, and illuminates a world for them which they have not often had access to, he is also familiar with their world as well. Rushdie interprets the Third World for Western readers in ways that are recognisable to them, using language that is understandable to them, and skewed by values that are analogous to the liberal Western values which many of his readers hold.

It is imperative not wholly to define Rushdie as a “liberal” writer, as this would significantly alter the interpretation of his work. While he certainly supports some of the views associated with what I am terming White liberalism – sympathy for oppressed groups, opposition to oppressive states, valuing of rationality and the imagination, scepticism about religion – his agenda is more postmodern than liberal. The oppositions between the open and closed nature of both White liberal ideology and the more communitarian-based Islamic world view is precisely what Rushdie is trying to negotiate in his novel. It is ironic that the argument over Satanic Verses made it appear that the novel utterly condemned Islam and completely defended liberalism (Slaughter 201). The stringency with which Rushdie supports liberal values was exaggerated because of the situation he found himself in post-publication of Satanic Verses and in particular after the *fatwa*.⁹ Rushdie has in fact expressed more conservative views of late regarding the war on terror and the relationship between Islam and terrorism post-September 11, 2001 (Sawhney and Sawhney 433) – views which neither his Muslim detractors nor his liberal supporters would find themselves particularly aligned with.

The problem with both Rushdie’s liberal views and his postmodern project, as Brennan points out, is that in many cases those liberal or postmodern values and his method of representation are antithetical to those whom he is interpreting. Moreover, the distinction between Western and non-Western readers is a tricky one. Rushdie can be seen

as a figure who has contributed signally to the divide between Third World Muslims and liberal Westerners, yet among the audience for his fiction in the 1980s were many Muslim immigrants living in London, including Hanif Kureishi who defended the book – admittedly not a practising Muslim. Moreover, in the country where his infamous text, Satanic Verses, generated most antagonism, Pakistan, those who actually *read* the book were by that act separated from those who objected most fiercely to its representation of their country and its religion, as by refusing to read the novel they claimed they were demonstrating their complete abhorrence of the alleged blasphemy. In examining the Rushdie Affair and its relation to the vexed issues of cultural translation, religious sensitivity and the limits of liberalism, I shall consider Brennan’s concept of the Third World interpreter in light of the cultural and ethical difficulties of determining whether the author has the right to speak without restraint or without attending to the sensitivities and beliefs of those whose views he speaks about. Brennan positions Rushdie as both insider and outsider: what does Brennan mean by this formulation and how does Rushdie’s uneasy positioning affect the way he represents one “audience” to another? I will also seek to disentangle the interpretive positions of the distinct groups caught up in the contentions generated by the book: not only Eastern Muslims and Western liberals but also the immigrant communities Rushdie writes about in Satanic Verses.

It pays to highlight at this point that the term “Muslim” does not refer to an homogenous group who share exactly the same beliefs and are all politically, religiously, culturally or ethnically aligned. At the same time, there was a certain unity in that most people of Muslim faith were opposed to the novel, if not a united front on how to respond to the offence caused and Khomeini’s *fatwa*. While there are always exceptions to the rule and risks in conferring particular opinions onto large, heterogeneous groups, to make any

useful critical analysis on this topic, one must consider the majority opinion and find a way of distinguishing different groups. I would agree with Daniel O'Neill, who observes that:

If The Satanic Verses (a book written by a Muslim immigrant) is a sign of cultural hybridity and a reminder to those who would create a monolithic version of Islam, the overwhelmingly negative reaction by Muslims to the novel is a clear indication that we should be still more wary of the current postmodern academic tendency to dismiss attempts at pointing out broad patterns of cultural belief as oppressive exercises in essentialism. (237)

I would stress, as with all the various terms used in this thesis – Them, Us, Muslims, liberals, fundamentalists, communitarians, East, West, minority, majority, Other, self – that these are terms which should not be granted too much reality. They are constructs which are useful for the purpose of this thesis which examines literary events where it appeared sharp demarcation of opinion and binaries developed, but it should not be assumed that these are stable, unbending, homogenous categories.

As such, by a critical scrutiny of the “fundamentalist” positions adopted by both outraged Muslims and high-minded Western liberals I shall show how these positions together led to an impasse that removed the possibility of debate and ultimately resulted in each side producing caricatures of the other. Finally, I shall examine the similarities and differences between the Rushdie Affair and the Nat Turner controversy. What then was the background to the publication of this most ferociously divisive book and what were the events, following its publication, that became known as the Rushdie Affair?

The Rushdie Affair

Salman Rushdie's fourth novel The Satanic Verses was published in the United Kingdom by Viking/Penguin on the 26th September 1988. Soon after this publication there was outrage in the Muslim world about the novel, indeed even prior to publication information divulged in pre-release materials and interviews had generated a climate of antagonism. On the 5th of October the novel was banned in Rushdie's home country of India. Just one month later Satanic Verses won the prestigious Whitbread "best novel" award in Britain, and was also a finalist for one of the most coveted awards in English literature, the Booker Prize, which presented Rushdie with the opportunity to win a then unprecedented second Booker. This approbation of the book when it was already proving controversial is reminiscent of how Styron's Nat Turner won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize despite igniting fury in the African-American community. Satanic Verses went on to be banned in South Africa in late November and eventually most Muslim and some non-Muslim countries, but it was not until early the following year that the Rushdie Affair as it was to become known, really caught the attention of the world media.¹⁰

In early January 1989 there were demonstrations, petitions, protests and book burnings, notably in Bradford, Yorkshire – which has a significant Muslim population – and in Hyde Park in London. The petition sent to Penguin was ineffective and attempts were made to have the book banned through the courts using old blasphemy laws. This appeal through the courts ultimately failed because it was deemed that the blasphemy laws could only be enforced in the case of insult to the Church of England. This highlights two crucial facts when considering the Rushdie Affair: first, there *are* limitations to freedom of speech in liberal societies, and what British Muslims were asking for was not a complete

removal of that freedom, but for a re-evaluation of where the boundaries lie that would acknowledge the value of their beliefs as members of British society. Second, it illustrates the difficulty faced in a multicultural society, where one group is often privileged over another. Is there any reason why Muslims should not expect the same protection from blasphemy that Christians are afforded? While there are expectations that immigrants who willingly come to another country perhaps must relinquish some of the rights they were afforded in their old country, there appears to be little reason why beliefs central to their identity should be so blatantly ignored while others are accommodated (O'Neill 225).

In February the intensity of Islamic anger over the book was demonstrated when six people were killed in riots in Pakistan, while in India one person was killed and more than one hundred injured in riots. Clearly the right of authors to speak, enshrined in Western liberal thought, had come into conflict with opposing views about the proper limits of the expression of opinion on matters of principle so deeply held that people were willing to die in their defence, even without reading the offensive material. When Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual and political leader in Iran, proclaimed a *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie, the conflict between faith and freedom was presented still more sharply. The *fatwa* placed a price of £1,500,000 on Rushdie's head. All Viking/Penguin books were banned in Iran and Viking swiftly apologised for the novel. At the suggestion of the Iranian President, Rushdie apologised but the apology was rejected by the Ayatollah and the death sentence was reconfirmed.

Following this, Rushdie and his wife at the time, American author Marianne Wiggins, went into hiding under the protection of the British government. Rushdie remained in hiding for most of the 1990s. The considerable and ongoing cost to the British taxpayer angered some British residents, particularly those who felt that Rushdie had knowingly brought the situation on himself. There were numerous publications and

petitions by other authors, both Western and non-Western, supporting Rushdie's right to speak. There were more riots and more deaths. Two moderate *imams* were shot in Brussels, the Japanese translator of Satanic Verses was murdered and the Italian translator was stabbed.¹¹ The book was not released in the United States until 22 February 1989, when many bookstores which carried the novel came under attack, some being bombed (Appignanesi and Maitland ix-x).

One result of this violent controversy was that the novel became a major publishing success, remaining at the top of bestseller lists in the United States for twenty-five consecutive weeks even though the novel was widely acknowledged to be very difficult. It would appear that many of those who bought the novel did not finish it, a crime of which many commentators in the media were also guilty (Parekh 3). The novel by now was much more than a literary phenomenon: it was both the source of riot and a conversation piece, a book that killed and which people could leave conspicuously on their coffee tables. This disparity in the West between readers and buyers curiously mirrored the situation in Pakistan and other Islamic communities where those who attacked the novel often refused to read it; thus its detractors and its defenders were connected. In the East those who condemned the book without reading it often did not have access to a copy because of censorship, they had to rely on excerpts of the allegedly blasphemous sections – which only served to inflame the situation because the sections were unavoidably read out of context. In the West those who did have access to the novel often failed to read it because of the narrative difficulties it presents to the reader seeking mere entertainment. In The Rushdie Affair: the Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West (1990) Daniel Pipes explains Rushdie's dismay at this lack of readership:

. . . virtually all those who condemned the book – and in some cases lost their lives in this cause – lacked first-hand familiarity with it, or with

excerpts of it, even in translation. Muslim critics, high and low, were not shy about admitting this ignorance The striking thing is that those who could read it chose not to.

This fact caused Rushdie paroxysms of frustration. “The thing that is most disturbing is that they are talking about a book that doesn’t exist. The book that is worth killing people for and burning flags for is not the book that I wrote. The people who demonstrated in Pakistan and who were killed haven’t actually read the book because it isn’t on sale there.” (113)

Rushdie’s expectation that people ought to have read the novel in order to criticise it is based on the traditional notion of debate as the reasoned exchange of different opinions based on knowledge of the topic and resulting in the modification and moderation of the opinions of each party. However, none of these conditions existed in the unfolding of the Rushdie Affair. I again return to the author’s expectation of reader rationality and the valuing of fiction as a public good which was discussed in the previous chapter. With issues of culture, race and religion, rationality is often absent, as novels like Nat Turner and Satanic Verses which take challenging and controversial approaches to these issues, offend the beliefs that are fundamental to the way the groups affected conceptualise their very identity.

For those who felt a particular ownership of the body of religious ideas supposedly attacked in Satanic Verses the issue was not how they might modify their own positions to find agreement with, or at least understanding of, the book’s supporters by way of objective study of the text. The book, in their eyes, announced itself as an enemy of Islam and an insult to the culture. Their objective was, then, to confront the insult; the offence they had suffered would only have been exacerbated by reading the blasphemous work. Like the African-Americans who met Styron’s Nat Turner with implacable antagonism as

a misrepresentation of their history and an offence to their cultural being, the question of the right of the individual to speak openly on any topic was secondary to the claims of an already humiliated community to defend their own view of their past and to represent themselves in terms acceptable to themselves. This is the same inflammatory situation – intensified by powerful religious emotions as well as the sense of a wounded history and cultural humiliation – as with Rushdie’s Satanic Verses. This belief within the community that Rushdie was adding to the cultural degradation that Muslims already suffered through Western representation was expressed by Edward Said:

Why must a Muslim, who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, now represent us so roughly, so expertly and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriate our tradition, reality, history, religion, language and origins? Why, in other words, must a member of our culture join the legions of orientalists in orientalising Islam so radically and so unfairly? (qtd. in Parekh 8)

Debate could not take place because the book was deemed so fundamentally antithetical to the community’s beliefs that no benefit might be derived from reading the novel. The possibility for debate as described here was also impeded by the White liberal response to the situation. Their reaction to the Muslim response to the novel was not one of tolerance or understanding, but a hardening of their views on freedom of speech and strict demands for the novel to be published and defended.

It is important to examine exactly what was judged to be so blasphemous about Satanic Verses, and also why this novel elicited such a vehement response. In Islam, there is a proscription against depictions of the prophet Mohammed, the purpose of which is to stop idolatrous worship of his image. The strength of this proscription can be seen recently in the Mohammed cartoons controversy. Rushdie – who studied the Qu’ran at

Cambridge – felt that this taboo had become so strong it was almost antithetical to the purpose that had originally motivated it. He wished to show Mohammed as a man, with flaws and weaknesses as well as great virtues, not a god, as he felt some were making him out to be. This in itself is very controversial. There were other controversial elements to the novel, however, such as the brothel where the prostitutes each took the name of Mohammed's wives. Read out of context, as was often the case because of the circulation of excerpts, many felt that Rushdie was saying that Mohammed's wives were whores.¹²

While Rushdie's novel certainly had blasphemous elements, the question remains as to why it in particular elicited such a vehement response. Paul Brians suggests that the very serious critique that Rushdie subjected Islam to was unprecedented (3). Yet, other critics believe that there have been books just as blasphemous as or more so than Rushdie's Satanic Verses (Ruthven 85). Another element which led to Satanic Verses being argued against so vehemently by Islamic fundamentalists was Rushdie's status. He was already a famous, well-respected author and his opinions would not be ignored by the British ruling elite. Therefore the novel was considered all the more dangerous by those who disagreed with its content. However blasphemous its literary company, Rushdie's novel was particularly poised to create an impact, just as Styron's Nat Turner was. The growing numbers of immigrants in Britain, their feeling of marginality in the community, the growing strength of fundamentalist Islam in the East – particularly as aligned in opposition to Western liberal values – all these considerations contributed to an atmosphere of heated and extreme position-taking; the middle ground was squeezed by the fierce ideologies of religious and political faith on both sides of the argument.

In "the West" a kind of liberal fundamentalism took hold in which Islamic radicalism had to be opposed at all costs and the "universal" rights and values aligned with European tradition were held to be under imminent threat: the future of humanity required

the uncompromising defence of these values and traditions. Rushdie's own position as both insider and outsider in respect of the West was at odds with both these fundamentalisms; although his sympathies and interests were clearly with the Western valuation of freedom of expression and the right to represent different cultures and religions in terms understood in the West, he also exhibits an investment in the value of the Islamic story he recounts in fictionalised form in his novel. Rushdie also highlights the separation between the perceived tolerance of the liberal West and the reality of racism and police brutality which his immigrant characters contend with. The goat-like, Satan figure that Saladin Chamcha morphs into is "a magic realist objectification of the way he has been perceived by British racists all along, and the unlawful beating he receives gives the lie to his conception of English society as the epitome of civilization" (Holmes).

The increasing role of the media and ability to disseminate information across vast distances quickly and easily, also meant that people became aware of the novel, even before its release, and in particular people who were not familiar with the form of the novel and its associated rules or licences. All of these factors set up a situation where Rushdie's novel became a focal point through which feelings and opinions not just about the novel but also about wider issues it involved could be channelled. Just as Styron's novel was a catalyst for the rise of cultural politics in the African-American community, Rushdie's novel signalled the complications of interactions between two vast belief systems – Western liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism – each at this moment constructing itself as a binary of the other.

The Rushdie Affair, "caused the deaths of over twenty people, disrupted billions of dollars in trade, brought profound cultural tensions to the surface, and raised issues about freedom of speech and the secular state that had seemingly been settled decades or even centuries earlier" (Ruthven 16). It signalled the growing sense of an unbridgeable distance

and irresolvable tensions between these two systems and the impossibility of communicating ideas and principles one to the other or translating the basic language of an exchange. This situation has only increased post-September 11, 2001 with the hardening of positions and radicalising of narratives each side tells itself about the other. Yet Rushdie's "blasphemous" novel in the attention it pays to Islam, the knowledge it displays of its central narratives, the respect it pays by taking those narratives seriously enough to reinvent them fictionally, is a text that points critically and affirmatively in both directions, towards the believers and the nonbelievers. Rushdie approaches Islam and the condition of British Muslims with a seriousness which was lacking from the controversy over the blasphemous Mohammed cartoons discussed in the Introduction. Even its assault on the naïve modes of understanding Islamic religious tradition is a form of regard: seeking to liberate Islam from its fiercer adherents implies a wish to reform not mock it; blasphemy itself might be seen as a kind of complement to religion in that, unlike the more usual stance of indifference, it grants it power.

The "Brown Sahib": Rushdie as Interpreter for the West

The Rushdie Affair is a controversy which should not be understood in terms of a strict binary between East and West, Muslim and Liberal. There is a more complex relationship between author and various audiences than in the Nat Turner controversy. In the case of Nat Turner, although the response to the novel was somewhat complicated by the place of historians in responding to the historical novel element of the book, it was relatively easy to distinguish the supporters of the novel – both in the journals of the intelligentsia and in the popular press – as overwhelmingly White, while the detractors of the novel were largely from the African-American community, and here also a popular

distaste for the novel was reinforced by the Black intellectual community. Over the past forty years the lines of opinion for and against the novel have shifted, with many Whites coming to understand the offensiveness of the novel to the Black community and some among the Black intellectual elite such as Cornell West, Henry Louis Gates and Spike Lee supporting the novel and Styron's right to speak. But when the novel was released the distinction between those in favour of the book and those against was very sharp, and the ability of the novel to polarise and antagonise has not wholly dissipated.

Only if the Affair is rendered in the most basic of terms could such an easy distinction be observed even at the beginning of the Rushdie Affair. Immigration and the concept of the insider/outsider figure meant that loyalties were neither predictable nor localised. Styron was quite clearly an outsider trespassing on the experience of the Other, he was attempting to write about that which he could neither experience nor know, mostly to others like himself. Rushdie, however, is not outside the Muslim community. What complicates Rushdie's position is that he belongs to many communities, but his membership is often compromised by his affiliation to other groups, so he cannot be defined as a complete insider or outsider of many of the groups who were involved in the Rushdie Affair. This complicates his right to speak markedly. What then does the concept of Rushdie as a Third World interpreter mean; why is he particularly suited to this role according to Brennan; and how does this complicate both his own position of authority to speak, and the response to his novel?

Rushdie's background as a privileged Muslim born in India and educated at Rugby School in England is well known, as are the various transplantations and conflicting loyalties in that background: his Muslim parents did not practise their religion; he was unable to accept Pakistani life on returning to live with his family; a religious sceptic, he studied the Qu'ran, at Cambridge University. These might be seen as the distinguishing

characteristics of the ambivalent postcolonial writer who chooses to live between opposing homes rather than identify with a nationalist cause. In a sense Rushdie looks back to displaced modernist writers like Katherine Mansfield, who found the colonial home too narrow and stifling and could not identify with its cultural nationalism yet were always somehow “colonial” in Europe. However, Rushdie’s case is different from hers because the binary in terms of which he is seen is sharper; he cannot blur his visible identity as easily as she did to pass as English, a colonial, a gypsy, even a Maori. Rushdie is identified in Europe with his Indianness, while in India and Pakistan he is identified with his Europeaness. While Mansfield has been described as “New Zealand European,” (O’Sullivan 9) Rushdie is not seen as an Indian-European. Moreover, Mansfield’s success as a writer in England became a source of national pride and ownership in her home country; Rushdie’s success in one “home” has only served to exacerbate antagonism towards his work in the “Other.”

Perhaps a more exact analogy is provided by James Joyce, a colonised subject who abandoned nationalism of his colonised people, about whom he nevertheless wrote obsessively. Like Joyce also, his unflattering fictional portraits of the religion of his background have fashioned him in the image of renegade and apostate. The difference here is that Joyce’s rejection of Catholicism was unequivocal, although he took pride in his extensive knowledge of that religion. Rather like the Victorian intellectuals in respect of Christianity Rushdie cannot let the religion of his fathers go, yet he grants it a power the Victorians recognised was failing in their own time. As I suggested earlier, even Rushdie’s blasphemy might be seen as a means of reforming Islam and thereby allowing it to survive in altered form; blasphemy, unlike indifference, grants power to what it maligns.

Rushdie, then, has been constructed around two opposing concepts of the right to speak about the Other. On one side, he is seen as an abuser of the image of his religion

and a traitor to his own people. On the other side, he has become a symbol of the freedom to satirise others no matter what the cost. The book itself does not support either position, both criticising and celebrating Islam, attacking Western societies for the maltreatment of immigrants and Islamic dictatorships for their savage ideology of purity. His success has rested on an ambivalence misinterpreted as antipathy or sympathy. His own party is that comprised of all those who have actually *read* his book, allowing themselves to be pitched into an imaginary world where ethics and loyalties must be negotiated not assumed.

Rushdie became part of the intellectual elite and literati, being particularly celebrated for his novel Midnight's Children (1981), which won the Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes, and indeed, he won the Booker of Bookers for that novel in 1993. Rushdie was thought of as a new archetype for Commonwealth literature. He was celebrated by the British literary scene, he was new, exciting, exotic, different, and yet, as Brennan explains, his was “a familiar strangeness.” He spoke perfect English, he wrote in English, his views appeared to be aligned to a Western liberal way of thinking. He was an educated man – a man educated by the English, but he was educated not just about the English, he knew about India, about Pakistan, he knew about Muslims. These are all reasons why the West “chose” Rushdie to be a Third World interpreter. Yet while the West have selected Rushdie as an interpreter, for such an interpretation to occur Rushdie must also acknowledge that selection and choose the West as an audience. While “the West” is certainly one of his major readerships, he addresses more than one audience in Satanic Verses. He addresses British Muslims, other British immigrants, Islamic fundamentalists, White liberals and Thatcher conservatives. Allowing that the position of Third World interpreter is gained through a process of both selection and volunteering acknowledges that Rushdie has considerably more agency in the process of that interpretation. Through that awareness he can subvert the interpretations that both the

West and the Third World expect from him. He is not simply an instrument of the West, as many Eastern Muslims claimed after Satanic Verses, but he is not interested in writing novels which serve only to resurrect the reputation of the Third World. He has his own project, a postmodern project, in which his aim is to destabilise all categories and essentialist beliefs.

The complexities and difficulties of Rushdie's insider/outsider status are particularly apparent in regard to the immigrant community that is the subject of Satanic Verses. As Brennan explains, "[a]s an upper-middle-class British Asian, Rushdie is not exactly representative of the Black communities of Brixton and Southall" (xii). These immigrant communities, particularly British Muslims, became embroiled in the Rushdie Affair, burning books, staging protests and launching law suits, all of which gained little public acknowledgment from the media until Khomeini's *fatwa* was imposed. Rushdie did have some support from the Muslim community, such as Hanif Kureishi, who, in the intertextual The Black Album (1995) supported Rushdie against the extremists, and the intellectuals who contributed to For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defence of Free Speech (1994). Such support was limited and, as indicated by the publication dates, generally came after the controversy was at its height, which may suggest that some Muslims were fearful of retribution if they supported Rushdie. However, for the most part the British Muslim community was against the publication of the novel, although the majority did not support the *fatwa* (O'Neill 237; Alibhai-Brown). Although Rushdie's work: "stands out because of the sheer detail and breadth of his acquaintance with various nuances of life in India and Pakistan, . . . within the South Asian diasporic community in Britain, Rushdie is generally perceived as an outsider . . . his ideals are read as being those of the liberal upper class (Sawhney and Sawhney 441).

Not only are Rushdie's ideals not particularly analogous to those within the community he is often associated with, his portrayal of the immigrant communities – although valuable for bringing those communities into the consciousness of the British mainstream – are not always especially positive representations. Just as there was a strong impulse in early African-American literature to present the race in a purely positive way because of the propensity for negative representations to feed into already prevalent White stereotypes, the same concerns could be raised about Rushdie's depiction of immigrant communities. There are characterisations in Satanic Verses which would have caused more concern had the rest of the novel not been so overshadowed by the blasphemous subplot. Brennan examines a few of these issues in his novel, whereby he explains that Rushdie subjects the immigrant communities of Britain to the same harsh criticism as he does the Ayatollah Khomeini, fundamentalist Islam and the English establishment:

If the Black communities are given the same savage scrutiny [as the English establishment] – if Asian middle-class hostel owners bilk their West Indian tenants, complain of being stuck in a country "full of Jews and strangers who lump [them] in with the Negroes," or who can think of the English only in the bigoted terms of the mad barber of Fleet Street, with a stiff upper lip on the outside but a secret obsession for kinky sex and death – a mood of specifically anti-institutional anger remains, and one that is not altogether cancelled by the ironies of the earlier work. (147)

Brennan also suggests that there are "class resentments that are simmering beneath the surface of an affair that has persistently been seen in religious terms alone (145). Rushdie has a valid goal in desiring to subject all-comers to the same criticism and satire, yet the problem with that is either you can end up alienating everyone, or some particular criticism becomes more important than the other ones.

While Rushdie is certainly part of the immigrant community in Britain, the way he interprets this community for Western Whites (for he interprets not just the Third World but also this community) is very similar to what the establishment may wish to hear. This alignment of values was of course part of the reason why Rushdie was “chosen” by the West as their interpreter, they wished to hear an “authentic voice” reproducing their own beliefs. Rushdie for the most part resists the temptation of relying on familiar stereotypes to present the Other to the West. Yet, Rushdie’s imbrication within the wealthy Western lifestyle has increased the possibility that he is out of touch with the reality of the life of a poor immigrant in Britain:

Several critics have sensed a lack of empathy in Rushdie’s treatment of traditionally disadvantaged groups. Thus Timothy Brennan writes: “The book’s characterisations of West Indians (like its characterisation of women) are often embarrassing and offensive,” while Feroza Jussawalla argues that Rushdie’s British education makes him “condescending to all things Indian.” (qtd. in Ruthven 19)

This can be seen in how he presents dub poetry in Satanic Verses. Rushdie make an amusing, clever parody of the poetry style and the main perpetrator of the poetry is a character of obvious ridicule and contempt. Yet this does not interpret for the White Western reader the powerful place that dub poetry has in the protest movements of Black Britain.¹³

Rushdie himself is out of touch with the place of dub poetry in this community, proving the imperfectness of this kind of interpretation of culture that is being requested of Rushdie. If his views are so imbued by the wealthy Western lifestyle he leads now, how useful is his work as interpretation of the Other? Being Other does not provide immunity from stereotypical thinking. He cannot speak on behalf of poor, Black immigrant

communities with absolute authority and authenticity, because he is both an insider and an outsider. Rushdie is certainly bringing these communities to the attention of his readers, and it is precisely because of his education and membership to the intelligentsia that he is able to bring his novels to a sophisticated Western readership that has little understanding of the life of British immigrants. Yet those same attributes which have enabled him to bring this unfamiliar consciousness into Western literature at the same time distance him from his subject. The more successful he becomes as an author, the more accepted he is by the West, the more he is initiated into the literati, the more inevitable it becomes that his views and lifestyles will begin to alienate him from the communities and issues that preoccupy his writing.

Such a situation can be seen in the case of Arundhati Roy in her novel The God of Small Things (1997). This novel examines the Indian caste system, and the pain that it causes for those of the lower castes, such as the Untouchables. This sympathetic depiction of the harsh realities of the caste system aligns itself with Western liberalism, which likes to think of itself as on the side of the oppressed. It confirms its views that the Indian caste system is holding back its people, is damaging, and that what would solve the problem there would be a more liberal, enlightened – i.e. Western – approach. While all of this may possibly be true, it does not actually interpret the Third World in a particularly balanced way, at least in the way the subjects of her novel wished to be represented. Roy faced a lot of criticism from home for the writing of the novel, particularly in regard to the final chapter when the higher caste heroine has sexual relations with a man who is “Untouchable” – lower caste.¹⁴ Rather than making White liberals question how accurate an “interpretation” of the Third World they are receiving in Roy’s novel, such criticism often only enhances a novel’s reputation and circulation in the West, as it is viewed as revolutionary or transgressive, and therefore a valuable contribution. Yet, as far as

understanding or interpreting the country and the caste system for the West, all it does is confirm pre-existing beliefs. While there are undoubtedly many who do believe that Roy accurately explained the nature of the caste system – that it is unjust and unfair to many Indians – it does nothing to represent those Indians, of which there are surely many, who believe in the value of the caste system, and that by depicting the sexual transgression of that system violates “the norms of decency” (Sreedharan). Would it not be useful to have those views “interpreted” for the West as well? There are a number of problems with the “cosmopolitan” writer being perceived as the *only* authentic voice of the Third World. While it is certainly useful to have the views of cosmopolitans available, it is not accurate to assume that they speak for the whole of the Third World. It is particularly unhelpful to presume that the people in the Third World who do not share the cosmopolitan views of their “interpreter” are ignorant.

Proponents of the more negative aspects of the cosmopolitan Third World interpreter are Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies. In their book Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair (1990), they call Rushdie (and his West-Indian counterpart V.S. Naipaul) a “Brown Sahib.”¹⁵ Sardar and Davies argue that literary Brown Sahibs such as Rushdie, who write from within a Western framework and liberal understanding, are colonial mimic men, they are participating in the colonist’s programme of denigrating the beliefs, values and histories of Third World people. They translate their religious attitudes to the world into an alien context, thereby laying claim to that which they reduce to their own barren world view:

The literary endeavours of the brown sahib are a product of this grand Western project. His brown colour ensures the eagerness of many Europeans to listen to his authentic voice and thus have their own prejudices confirmed. But by appropriating the history and sacred territory

of non-Western cultures and secularising them, reducing them to an appendage of Western civilisation and a mere segment in the history of secularism, the brown sahib makes totally superfluous all non-Western worldviews that give meaning to the life of three-quarters of mankind. Non-Western cultures and histories, indeed the non-Western people themselves, are effectively written out of existence. (87)

While Rushdie's position is complicated by his assimilation into Western society, and he certainly cannot be thought of as representative of Muslims generally or indeed even many British Muslims, the claims that he is writing non-Western peoples out of existence and that he is writing from a position of complete collusion with the West are unjust. This position suggests a lack of awareness on the part of Rushdie of his status as interpreter for the West and his ability to use that awareness to gain agency and subvert expectations by presenting a literary work, "an ethical event" which is subject to his own ideological motivations.

Rushdie does seem to be aware of his position as interpreter, and of how he is viewed as a representative of India, the Third World, Islam, British Muslims and the wider immigrant community, often simultaneously. While he certainly identifies with values associated with Western liberalism, like freedom of speech, he does not agree with the treatment of migrant communities within Britain; he attacks the British government's treatment of Muslims in Satanic Verses. In writing about British immigrant communities and about communities outside the West he is not attempting to write them out of existence anymore than he is attempting to write Western peoples whom he also satirises out of existence. He is attempting to focus on the particular position and identity of the immigrant. Sardar and Davies claim that the identity of the Brown Sahib is confused and multi-layered, they have to play so many roles they do not know which is their "true"

identity. Rushdie obviously believes this is the condition of the immigrant, whose identity is never fixed, but Rushdie is attempting to promote this as a powerful identity, where hybridity can be looked upon as a positive.

Freedom of Speech: The Problem of Liberal Fundamentalism

While there was an ideological divergence between White liberalism and the values of the African-American community that resulted in the Nat Turner controversy, in the Rushdie Affair, the ideologies of liberalism and Islam were not just divergent, they were openly hostile to one another. While there was considerable criticism in “the West” about how the closed, intolerant nature of Islam and “the East” made debate – that rational exchange and modification of opinion as discussed earlier in the chapter – impossible, there has been less consideration paid to how the liberal fundamentalism of “the West” also contributed to that impasse. “Fundamentalism” is a word that is not often associated with the Western world, and particularly not with liberalism. Though there has been a rise in Christian fundamentalism in the United States, particularly post-September 11, 2001, this is also usually held to be in stark contrast with the beliefs of liberalism. Instead, “fundamentalism” tends to be associated with the East and especially with Islamic militancy. In the Western media and in the rhetoric of politicians it is precisely that closed, intolerant fundamentalism that the West is struggling against, it is thought to be antithetical to Western beliefs. Yet, “fundamentalism,” defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: “the strict maintenance of the ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion or *ideology*,” (emphasis mine) is not foreign to the West. Even liberalism with its privileged status in the West, its universalist claims and its sceptical stance towards all belief systems can present itself as a closed ideology in times of conflict with opposing world views. In

this section, the different ideologies of “East” and “West” and how the tensions between those were exacerbated by the media are examined. I will also further explore this concept of liberalism as fundamentalism. Finally I will consider how the ethical event of the Rushdie Affair points to the difficulties of negotiating the limits on freedoms in multicultural societies.

It is important to set up the particular sides and oppositions that were apparent in the Rushdie affair. On one side, there was “the West,” consisting of those liberals within the intelligentsia, White press and other authors and cosmopolitans. The basic beliefs of such liberals were of a secular state, where religion has no influence on the government or rights of people – of freedom of speech, freedom of choice, and freedom of the press. They are thought of as the basic human rights, they are the foundation of democracy, they are non-negotiable. They have formed the starting point of the United Nations ideas on human rights, and they are thought to protect the oppressed. These ideas are completely entrenched in Western societies, i.e. Western Europe, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It would be these countries who most ardently defended Rushdie’s right to speak, and the importance of publishing Satanic Verses despite Muslim concerns.

On the other side of the debate were not just Islamic fundamentalists, represented by the Ayatollah Khomeini, who believed that Rushdie and his publishers and editors must be put to death for their crimes against Islam. This was the most extreme form of response to Satanic Verses, and certainly most British Muslims did not wish Rushdie physical harm or death, this can be demonstrated by the fact that none of the some one million Muslims in Britain attempted to harm Rushdie in the months before the *fatwa* when he was unprotected (Parekh 3). The interaction between liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism is of less concern to this thesis. These two worldviews appear to be completely irreconcilable, and while their continued interaction should not be disregarded, it is not of

paramount concern to this thesis. The right of Pakistan or India or any other “non-Western” country to ban the novel is of less concern than the calls to ban the novel in liberal countries of the European model. The main focus of this side of the debate then is those British Muslims, who wanted the book banned in Britain. While they of course brought specifically Muslim ideals and concerns to the problem, the overarching tension here is between liberal and communitarian ideologies.

Liberalism is above all interested in the individual. Communitarianism puts an emphasis on the success of the community, not the individual. This is becoming an area of increasing tension as Western societies become more “multicultural,” because most of the world’s cultures conceive of themselves in communitarian not individual ways (Slaughter 188). So for this section of the chapter, I wish to examine how these tensions between White liberals and British Muslims (communitarian based ideology) played out in the Rushdie Affair, how they were exacerbated by the position of power liberalism has within the media, and how they highlight the ongoing problems of literature within a multicultural society. Those tensions were started between the communitarian minded African-American community, and the liberal White literary establishment, represented by Styron. Hostilities were amplified in the Rushdie Affair by the broader terms on which this was played out, between “the West” and “the East” with the more localised version being Muslim immigrants versus White liberals in Britain.

The response to Rushdie’s novel from the British Muslim community was one of great offence, but was measured and within the normal bounds of expected response in a Western liberal state. There were appeals to Members of Parliament and the publishers, and the initial request was for the book to include a statement explaining that it was not an accurate representation of the history of Islam, but these appeals were ignored. The media were also uninterested in the offence caused to the Muslim community. Protests that

involved some 7000 Muslims in Bradford gained no media traction, “[n]either the quality nor the quantity papers published the offending passages, or invited Muslim spokesmen to state their case Instead they mocked the Muslims, accused them of ‘intolerance’ and wondered if a tolerant society should tolerate the intolerant” (Parekh 3). Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa* completely altered both the Muslim demands about the novel and the British media’s commentary on the situation.

The situation quickly became reduced to the familiar binary of a battle between fundamentalist, oppressive, barbaric Muslims and a tolerant, enlightened, civilised West. A common response was that of Silvia Albertazzi declaration that “Freedom of expression is more important than *any* offence *any* book might cause” (qtd. in Brians 3). “The West” was portrayed as a bastion of freedom and “the East” – and anyone associated with Islam – were deemed to be intolerant and ignorant. This extended to Britain’s immigrant Muslim population, who, after symbolically burning copies of Satanic Verses to demonstrate their anger were compared to Nazis by Anthony Burgess in the Independent, with the protests described as, “a barbaric act of intolerance” by Peter Jenkins in the same paper (Parekh 5). Khomeini’s *fatwa* and the burning of books may have demonstrated Muslim intolerance and removed the chance for debate, but what was also apparent was that “debate” of the issues was not going to occur anyway, because the British public did not take the Muslim concerns seriously and found them irrelevant. As far as they were concerned, the British liberal state protected freedom of speech, and Muslim immigrants had no justification to challenge such rights.

Although it has been said that the majority of the community were against the *fatwa*, many leaders did not come forward and condemn Khomeini’s decree. Although the *fatwa* gave the community negative publicity, it was the only publicity they had received, and at this point the community appeared to be functioning on a premise of “all publicity is

good publicity.” Finally they were gaining some interest from the media and the publishers and Rushdie himself had begun to take Muslim concerns more seriously, apologising for the novel. While of course the apology was suspect, it was better than being completely ignored or ridiculed; it granted the community some power. The previously very reasonable demands were escalated to banning the book completely.

It appears because British Muslims were of no concern to the rest of the public, any moral obligation Rushdie may have had to show some restraint in his novel was also unnecessary. This highlights one of the problems facing immigrant groups, that despite the protection of free speech and the calls for debate and discussion that Rushdie’s book was meant to be creating according to the West, these immigrant groups had little other way of venting their frustration with the publication and literary achievements of Satanic Verses. What the commentary by the media indicates is that liberals are also susceptible to fundamentalist impulses. In the dispute with Islam in Western countries liberal values have sometimes presented themselves in terms which are self-enclosed and based on fundamentals which require critical questioning. There is a conceptualisation of liberal values that they are “universal” ideals and that they should be as inherent to all human society as they seem to be to Westerners. Yet those values associated with liberalism have had a relatively short history. The separation of church and state, the demotion of religion to a matter of individual choice and privacy only occurred in the West a few hundred years ago, developing out of the Enlightenment, where there was a challenge to the authority of the church, and science and rationality became the new orthodoxy. The associated ideals such as freedom of speech and tolerance only developed then as well, but the actual effective realisation of those ideals has of course been a lot shorter, as for example, the enslavement of African-Americans would attest to.

This of course suggests that far from being inherent universal ideals, they have developed out a very specific *Western* history. Islam and the wider non-Western community have had a very different history, one which has favours the community over the individual. Part of the ongoing dialogue about the values of the West is that perhaps the West is simply more “evolved” than the East, that all societies and cultures are moving in the same direction towards the “culturally neutral” beliefs of liberalism, albeit at different speeds. The concept of such “progress” is a Western idea, coming out of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century evolutionist thought. Such ideological superiority is naïve and insulting to non-Western cultures, and the promotion of ideals that are clearly akin to Western individual conceptions of the self as “universal,” merely enable Western societies to keep the power structure at the status quo and extricates them from the requirements placed on non-Western peoples of having their ideals or culture changed by another: “Thus they [non-Western peoples] claim that whereas liberalism purports to be neutral, it merely masks the imposition of a closed common culture that denies them equality . . . and they oppose as well the assumption that they will assimilate to the values and style of those cultures” (Slaughter 200-01).

My point here is not to show that Western liberalism does not have important values, or that they are not legitimate ideals. Many in the East may wish to adopt some or all of the principles of liberalism. The point is to demonstrate that the beliefs of Western liberalism are simply that, they are beliefs. They have developed in a very different way to the beliefs that direct the Islamic nations, but they are beliefs which have developed from history. Although they are not religious beliefs, they are held with the same fervour that religious beliefs are held in religious societies, or they can come to be held with that kind of intensity under the pressure of some standoff with opposing values. They are simply being guided by a different set of beliefs and guidelines.

So if indeed, the West does hold on to its liberal values with an almost religious fervour, then how does that affect the Rushdie Affair, the right to speak and the consequences of the publication of controversial novels like Satanic Verses and Nat Turner? What effect does it have on debate, or the possibility of debate, which is so often the suggested reason for novels like these? What effect does it have on minority or immigrant groups, who may feel differently about the principles of liberalism and how it affects their community and what White liberals believe is best for them? Sardar and Davies make a revealing point about the result of this entrenched liberalism:

When one's ideology, in this case secular fundamentalism, becomes the yardstick by which reality is measured, one exists in a totally insulated space that permits no counter-reality. In this insulated space, it is not possible to see the other side's objectivity with any objectivity. Every defender of Rushdie's freedom to do what he wishes without social accountability saw the argument only in singular, monolithic terms, or in Rushdie's own words, in "the light of secularism and the darkness of religion." It is not possible to understand the position of the other side, let alone comprehend its arguments when one's own value, secularism, is seen as *the* fundamental value to which all others must defer. (6)

Though of course much the same can be said of Islamic fundamentalism in this way, in which it proves impossible for Islamic fundamentalists to understand or appreciate the Western point of view, this is a common way of understanding Muslim ideals, but it is not the usual way to understand liberalism, because the basic principle of liberalism is supposedly tolerance. The result of this liberal fundamentalism, as demonstrated by the media commentary on the Rushdie Affair, is a lack of tolerance. The possibility for informed debate and understanding – something which is meant to be a result of the right

to speak – is lost, and not just because of British Muslims being unable to accept the culture of their adopted country, but because that culture has been conceived in such closed terms that it is impossible for them to find a way into it which acknowledges their equality, and their right to tolerance.

The Rushdie Affair highlights the difficulty in creating a truly “multicultural” society. Liberalism must be accepted as part of the problem, not just of the solution, to the creation of a society in which communitarian and liberal cultures can offer tolerance to one another. Daniel O’Neill examines the case of the Rushdie Affair in respect to some of the most respected contemporary theorists on multiculturalism – Will Kymlicka, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor. His conclusion is that the multicultural society in which liberal values and respect for minority values can co-exist is a myth. The Rushdie Affair demonstrates that there is no way to reconcile the beliefs of a Muslim community who wish to see a novel banned because it causes them offence and a liberal majority whose preference lies with the right of the individual. While I agree there is certainly no perfect solution which would leave all sides completely satisfied because the two ideologies pull in opposite directions, it should be remembered that the realities of the two ideologies are often not so far apart. Despite his negative conclusion, O’Neill discusses some factors which point to a possibility for accommodation from both sides:

First, while Muslims in Islamic countries were deeply divided by the Khomeini death sentence, Western Muslims were overwhelmingly unified in rejecting it. This was for the simply reason that, even if it were valid legally (and most thought it was not), Islamic law did not apply in non-Muslim countries. This meant the goal for Western Muslims was banning the book, not punishing Rushdie. Second, Muslims argued that no free speech regime was absolute, and the question was always where to draw

appropriate lines between acceptable and unacceptable expression. Liberal-democratic states, they maintained, ban certain types of material with regularity, for reasons rooted in Western history and culture. Third, and in light of these concerns, they argue that an increasingly plural society like Britain, in order to live up to the multicultural idea of cultural equality, needs to make room for a broader legal conception of speech-related harm.

(229)

What this quote rightly indicates is how deeply the caricatures of the press became entrenched within both sides' understanding of the argument.

Despite the liberal demands to uphold the right to speak freely in their society, and the fears that Muslims were trying to curtail Western citizens' inalienable right to free speech, the simple fact is that there have always been limits on that freedom. There are limits on hate speech in most Western countries and there were laws against blasphemy (against the Church of England) in Britain. In questioning the limits of freedom of speech, British Muslims were not doing something extraordinary or unheard of, they were asking for their beliefs to be considered when those limits are set. Liberals were asking Muslims to be "tolerant" of Rushdie, but it appears that liberals were no more willing to be "tolerant" of Muslims' beliefs and their expectation that they should be protected in their adopted country. What is also apparent is that while British Muslims only wished to ban the book (and indeed, their wishes at the beginning of the Affair were to have a warning on the book saying it was not an accurate reflection of Islam) British Muslim leaders were perhaps not as vocal as they should have been in pronouncing the community's opposition to the *fatwa*. The community's anger at how their views had been so blatantly disregarded when they attempted to make them known through the liberal channels no doubt

discouraged the one thing which seemed to make liberal Britain recognise how serious the offence was and the possible consequences.

Prior to the *fatwa*, the British mainstream took little notice of the discontent among the British Muslim community over the novel. Instead, Rushdie's novel received accolades and awards, just as Styron before him, after writing a novel which deeply offended a part of the community. But the concerns of communitarian cultures cannot be ignored. Not only because Western society is becoming more multi-cultural, but because most of the world's cultures are not individualistic but collective or communitarian. It demonstrates that while we may live in societies which loudly assert their "freedom," we do not live in an equal one. The freedoms afforded to different groups are not equal, nor is the time and attention paid to voices representing those groups. If multicultural societies are really going to function in some sort of harmony, then there needs to be compromise from both sides, particularly in cases such as the Rushdie Affair. There was room for compromise, particularly early on before each side got so entrenched within their position there was no way out. Assuming that all the world's people are marching progressively towards universal liberal values is a fundamentalist and fundamentally flawed perception.

* * *

Rushdie and Styron: Similarities and Differences

These two examples of the problematic nature of the right to speak in contemporary literature, Satanic Verses and Nat Turner, have much in common. They demonstrate both the power of literature to be a space in which ethical dilemmas can be explored, where "realities that are normally separated can meet, establishing a dialogic

encounter, a meeting with the other” (Carlos Fuentes qtd. in Cologne-Brookes 154). The novels also express the difficulties in bringing those separated realities together, without producing further division. Both these examples contend with the reaction of minority groups, or non-Western groups to the “ethical event” of literature, in particular literature which is attempting to represent them in some way. There are few instances of comparison of these two situations in critical literature, but a recent study of Styron’s novels suggested that the “efforts to reject Styron's right to speak as Nat Turner [were] an ominous step in a direction that, in its most insidious manifestation, led to Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie” (Cook 112). It is therefore useful to explore both the similarities and differences between these two examples which come some twenty years apart and involve different communities and membership dynamics. This comparison will lead into my final chapter, where I will make my conclusion about the right to speak in contemporary literature based upon my analysis of these two novels.

Styron’s Nat Turner was one of the first novels to contend with the phenomenon of cultural politics in the late 1960s. Never before had there been such an overwhelming demand for cultural ownership and authenticity. African-Americans asserted their sole possession of the right to represent themselves and their history. This is in many ways antithetical to the *raison d'être* of the Western novel as it is based upon the idea of the imaginary: the ability to imaginatively enter other lives. This power of imagination can be particularly fraught when attempting to imaginatively represent the lives of historical figures, as was the case for Styron representing the voice of slave rebellion leader Nat Turner, and Salman Rushdie for the prophet Mohammed.

Both Rushdie and Styron had a particular interest in the historical figures whose voices they appropriated, and how their particular histories were influencing the present. For Styron, the legacy of slavery was omnipresent for him as a White Southerner. He was

fascinated by the institution and its impact on American life, past and present. This fascination went far beyond Nat Turner, with his interest in the institution of slavery significantly influencing his understanding of the Holocaust, which he examines in Sophie's Choice. Although not a practising Muslim, Rushdie had been a scholar of the Qu'ran at Cambridge University, and he was concerned about how the prophet was being made to seem perfect, godly, by some Muslim leaders who were emphasising a new fundamentalist era of Islam. One of his aims with Satanic Verses was to reduce the prophet to what he was – a man. Unlike Styron, however, whose entire novel focussed on Nat Turner and the institution of slavery, Rushdie's blasphemous challenge to Islam was restricted to a subplot, with the central theme of the novel primarily concerned with the peculiar, disjointed, postmodern identity of the immigrant. In the subsequent controversy though, the blasphemous chapters of the novel became the overwhelming focus of readers, commentators and critics; the other elements of Rushdie's novel, both positive and negative, were lost. Although there were parts of Styron's novel that were more controversial than others – such as the rape fantasises, or the homosexual encounter – the novel was considered in its entirety by critics and readers.

While Styron's use of first person narration undoubtedly made the novel more controversial than it would have been, there was not one overwhelming element of the novel which caused the African-American community's vitriolic attack on the book. Rushdie's novel became far more dismembered by the criticism it faced. This "dismemberment" was in both a physical and an ideological sense. When the novel was read it was often just as excerpts of the blasphemous passages. The ideological message that it was thought to carry in the "East" was one of ridicule and contempt of Mohammed and Muslims. In the "West," the message was diluted to being a tirade against the restrictions of Islamic fundamentalism. Both sides had taken elements of the novel and

fashioned it into something it was not, as Rushdie's postmodern purpose was to denounce all essentialist ideologies, not to promote one over the other. It is probable that Rushdie understood how his novel would be received in the East – though it is unlikely he envisioned it unfolding quite as it did. However, Brennan explains: “. . . it is probably not true that Rushdie foresaw the way Satanic Verses would be manipulated by the Western press. Given Rushdie's adherence to the principle of satiric 'equal time', it must have been dismaying to him to see the novel made into a fable of Western freedom vs. Oriental fanaticism” (144). The arguments over both Satanic Verses and Nat Turner became reduced to binaries which oversimplified the novels and the response required of readers.

There are a number of elements in Satanic Verses which did not gain the attention that they might have, had the novel not been considered in such reductionist terms by both “East” and “West.” While this includes the identity of the immigrant, it also comprises those other areas of the novel where it descends into offensive satire of other minority groups, such as the often stereotypical representation of England's West Indian immigrant community as examined earlier in the chapter. Rushdie's right to speak on the issues of immigrant communities which he has even less connection to was never challenged. While this lack of focus on other elements of the novel was undoubtedly caused by the prominence of the blasphemous passages, Satanic Verses is also a far more wide-ranging, complex novel than Nat Turner. Styron's novel, although a sophisticated literary work, is not complicated by numerous ideological motivations or nonlinear narrative. In his postmodern project, Rushdie is deliberately attempting to resist the possibility of the novel having one interpretation, or conforming to one essentialist ideology. The irony is that rather than provoking a response which recognised the inherent complexities of the novel and its representation of Islam, immigrants and liberalism, Satanic Verses was seen in even more reductionist terms, and much of the novel's complexities were ignored.

This concept of how Rushdie and Styron's novels were interpreted by different reading communities raises the issue of how much either of them knew about what response their novels would elicit from various communities. There was a lot of media hype for both of these novels prior to their release and they were both highly anticipated. Styron had serialised some of his novel and discussed his creative process with Harpers magazine prior to the release, and his novel received the highest payment from the National Book Club at that time in history. Rushdie gave a large number of interviews prior to the release of his novel, in which he often discussed how his novel would be controversial; as Malise Ruthven explains: "Satanic Verses was massively 'hyped' by Salman Rushdie and by Penguin, his publishers Like any author, Rushdie sought the largest possible readership for his book. The more he promoted it, however, the more its subversive contents would come to the attention of people unequipped by culture, education or inclination to read the work as fiction" (160-61). These novels were more vulnerable to controversy and criticism from the minority groups they were about precisely because they were cleverly marketed, highly promoted and also critically successful in the White literary establishment. The suggestion of controversy or transgression, as there was with Nat Turner and Satanic Verses, made the novels appealing to a larger audience. The flipside of that of course is that the controversy ended up not just promoting the books and exciting interest from the reading public, it also eventually took the focus away from the literary works themselves and resulted in the novels being unreadable to some groups.

This untranslatability of the novels to particular reading groups is one of the major similarities between Styron's Nat Turner and Rushdie's Satanic Verses. The novelist in the West often takes on the role of social agitator. Literature is a forum in which controversial ideas and revolutionary thinking can instigate discussion and debate in the wider context of society. The hard oppositions of society can be presented so that they can

then be moderated through discussion. For this to occur, however, there has to be acceptance that this is the role of literature, and the novels have to be read for debate to take place. It is apparent from both the Nat Turner controversy and the Rushdie Affair that in the communities that criticised the novels, they had not been widely read. These novels were so offensive and transgressed the main beliefs of these communities to such an extent, there was no inclination from the majority of these groups to read the novel. Indeed, in the case of Satanic Verses this was also the case for many of those who supported the novel. Although the novel became a best seller, many of those who bought the novel did not end up reading much of it because they found it impenetrable.

For Styron, while the ten Black writers and other Black critics certainly read the novel, their vitriol was so intense it deterred most of the African-American community apart from the intellectuals from reading the novel. This of course shut down any possibility of true debate about the novel beyond the intellectual realms. As discussed earlier, for true debate to occur there needs to be a possibility of compromise, moderation and understanding. There was no room for compromise from the ten Black writers: Styron was a bigot who had written a racist tract in Nat Turner. Eventually the novel dropped from view even as a target for critique in the African-American community. Similarly, there was also no compromise from White liberals like Styron, however, as they considered the Black response ill-informed and ignorant, and so chose to ignore it.

In the Rushdie Affair, many Muslims did not read the novel because it was felt it would add to insult. Those who did read it often only read excerpts, which were inevitably read out of context. This resulted in an informed debate (consistent to the parameters I outlined earlier) being impossible. There was also the added complication that many of the people who knew about the novel or who had possibly read the novel or excerpts did not accept it as purely fiction:

“One of the side effects of the mass media,” Umberto Eco observed recently, “is that they bring fiction to people who’ve never read a novel before, and who don’t share in the fictional agreement, the suspension of disbelief.” There were probably, he added, no more than 50,000 people in any country who belonged to the category of novel-readers.

It seems clear from the chronology of protest that Rushdie’s Muslim critics in India were alerted to the contents of Satanic Verses even before the book became available, through Rushdie’s own pre-publication interviews As the campaign progressed, it fully confirmed Eco’s observation: not only had the non- or recently-literate familiarised themselves with the offending passages, but even apparently sophisticated people like Shabbir Akhtar revealed a surprising lack of familiarity with the terms of the “fictional agreement.” (Ruthven 160-61)

This suspension of disbelief is often not possible for marginalised groups (or for “liberal fundamentalists” either). While this is exacerbated by their lack of familiarity with the form of the Western novel and a disparity between the purpose of literature in the West compared to their own traditions, it is perhaps also because of their marginalised status within Western society.

While the majority of “novel-readers” are White, the right to speak on ethical issues of race, culture and religion through the medium of novels in multicultural societies will always be fraught with difficulty. The reaction by minority groups to the “ethical event” of literature will vary according to culture and status however, as demonstrated by the differences between Muslim and African-American reactions to novels which transgressed their limits of representation. The difference between the Rushdie Affair and the Nat Turner controversy was that the immigrant Muslim community in Britain felt they

were being marginalised by one of their own. The perceived attack had come from within. While Styron's novel certainly created uproar in the Black community, particularly the intellectual community, in a sense there would be little surprise at such an attack occurring. Nat Turner became the focus of a movement to claim back ownership of Black history and the right to speak. An attack by a White author on the Black community was nothing new, what made Nat Turner different was that Styron was speaking in the first person, and was ostensibly coming from a place of liberal endeavour to help the Black community. The way Rushdie's novel was viewed by British Muslims is in some ways more akin to the novels by Black women writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in the 1970s, which exposed elements of the Black community which many felt should be kept private, or Anita Hill's sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas, where she was seen as a traitor to the race or the pawn of White feminists.¹⁶ Satanic Verses divided the Muslim community in far more complex ways than the Nat Turner novel, and elicited a far more explosive response.

While Rushdie faced *fatwa*, rioting and symbolic book burning, Styron met with intellectual condemnation and anger at public book debates. The reactions of the two intellectual communities are revealing in their differences as well. While there were certainly many who condemned the book, there was also support for Rushdie and his novel from some Muslim intellectuals, although many could not publicly express such support for fear of retaliation from radicals following Khomeini's death threat. Once the palpable sense of anger in the community had dissipated somewhat through the passing of time there were more expressions of support, culminating in the book For Rushdie: Muslim Writers in Defence of Free Speech. As explained earlier, there was no such split in the African-American community over Styron's novel. There are a number of explanations for the disparate responses from the intellectual communities to these novels. The reaction

to Styron's novel, although vehement, was not life threatening and generally did not transgress the boundaries of what is considered an acceptable response to a novel in the "West." Had there, for example, been leaders of Black Power calling for Styron to be assassinated as an enemy of the race there would have been a more urgent motivation for the intellectual elite to defend Styron's right to speak.

The other reason that there was less division in the response of the African-American intellectual community – and indeed the African-American community at large – to Styron's Nat Turner was that at the time the novel was released the community may have been more homogenous than the Muslim community. There was a strong code of racial solidarity in the African-American community at this time which was not transgressed until later in the 1970s when writers like Morrison and Walker began to write about the problems of their community and the impact on its women. Styron's novel was released at the height of the civil rights movement, and while there were certainly disputes within the African-American community about the best way to achieve their goals of equality there was no dispute about the overall aim of the African-American community at the time, which was to advance the community and to create a positive identity for themselves. Styron's novel was felt to be antithetical to those aims.

This solidarity of thought which enabled the intellectual and grassroots communities to respond in the same way to Styron's novel did not exist within the Muslim community to this extent. This was largely because the response to Rushdie's novel involved two separate groups of Muslims. There were those who resided in the "East," who were more fundamentalist, had very little access to the novel and were unfamiliar with the Western literary scene. Then there were those Muslims who had relocated to Britain, some such as Rushdie himself who were assimilated into Western society and some who were less amenable to this: "The majority of the British Muslim community

exploded into rage – all, that is, but the tiny portion of it represented by Rushdie and a small Anglo-Indian coterie, most of whom had been educated at exclusive institutions where they had become fully assimilated into British society” (Ruthven 9). So there were numerous divisions and ruptures between Muslim immigrant communities, as well as the division between the intellectuals in the West and those Muslim intellectuals who resided in the East where, “[i]t is not improbable that the novel is enjoying a considerable ‘underground’ success among elites in the Muslim world, those who have access to diplomatic passports and other privileges” (Ruthven 159).

While both these novels were viewed as potentially destructive to their subjects, there have been positive consequences for the communities that felt so aggrieved by Nat Turner and Satanic Verses. Of course, particularly in Rushdie’s case, this has come at an extremely high cost, including many human lives. Just as the extreme negative reaction was not entirely anticipated by these novelists, the positive effects of the communities being compelled to protest against the alleged offences of the novels were also probably not anticipated. For African-Americans, Nat Turner provided a real focus point to bring the community together to fight against the appropriation of Black history. It was a powerful catalyst for the establishment of cultural politics. For British Muslims, Rushdie’s novel provided a way to enter the consciousness of the British mainstream; while there were certainly very negative elements to their portrayal in the media, their presence was finally being recognised, and could no longer be ignored.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Too often in the past this “identification” has been a tactic adopted to avoid guilt, rather than to comprehend difference. This explains why I argue that a White writer should not write as Other: the risks are too great that privilege has obliterated that writer’s awareness of difference. Thus I am forced to maintain one of those fictional but ideologically essential boundaries between Them and Us that I would prefer did not exist.

– Margery Fee “Why C.K. Stead didn’t like Keri Hulme’s the bone people: Who Can Write as Other” 27.

Despite Margery Fee’s argument that Whites should not be able to write as Other, at the end of this thesis I arrive at a different conclusion.¹⁷ While I sympathise with Fee’s position and understand her motivations in placing this limitation on the novelist’s right to speak, the effectiveness of such restrictions are questionable. A key problem with Fee’s proscription is the difficulty in constructing a boundary between “Them” and “Us” in the increasingly multicultural society that the “ethical event” of literature inhabits. The ability to clearly determine membership of particular communities is often obscured by factors such as immigration and mixed ancestry. A quote by a reviewer of Hanif Kureishi’s The Black Album, cited on the back cover of the book, reveals how this breakdown of the margins and the centre is affecting literature in a dynamic way: “The Black Album is British literature. While Kureishi mocks that literature and its milieu, loves it, rejects it and annoys it, novels like The Black Album are also transforming it.”

The definition of the minority is one of the main concerns of Fee’s article, and in attempting to define her understanding of “Them” and “Us” she comes to the conclusion

that, “to be classified as ‘Fourth World,’ writing must somehow promote indigenous access to power without negating indigenous difference. It is conceivable that a minority group writer, intent on acceptance by the majority, may in fact produce writing that does not do this” (19), she does not explain if the reverse can happen, whereby a non-minority group writer could successfully promote minority access to power without negating difference and therefore write as Other. Fee believes that it is normally the critics of the minority group who are “the best judges” (19) of which writing fits this criterion and which does not.

Fee’s way of conceptualising membership to minority groups is perhaps too reliant on ideological alignment. From the reaction of African-American critics, it is obvious that Styron is not considered to be writing effectively as Other. Yet although Rushdie certainly seems Other – one of “Them” to the West – his ability to speak on behalf of various communities is complicated. Many Muslim critics, certainly in the East, believed Rushdie’s writing was too influenced by White liberalism and was part of a “Zionist conspiracy” (Parekh 6), although opinion was more moderate and somewhat more divided among British Muslims. By Fee’s definition then, whether Rushdie really has the right to speak is not clear. He is not White but there is no consensus from the minority group on whether his writing is enhancing their power or diminishing it, and Rushdie’s purpose in writing the novel appears to be chiefly motivated by a postmodern abhorrence of any essentialist thought, rather than the desire to promote access to power for British immigrants.¹⁸

What is apparent is that Fee’s proscription that White writers should not write as Other may have restricted Styron’s right to speak in Nat Turner, but her boundaries on creative freedom have no definite bearing on the Rushdie Affair. There will always be controversial literature, and while placing limits on creative freedom is one way to cope

with the concerns raised by such novels, without further broad restrictions (which I am sure Fee, as I, would be reluctant to endorse), the ability of literature to cause offence will not disappear. Novels such as Nat Turner and Satanic Verses are “ethical events” which, when approached with sensitivity, present an opportunity for the hard oppositions of society expressed in these novels to be moderated. It is impossible to develop any strategy to cope with the ethical dilemmas of literature that will ensure complete satisfaction from both sides, and retreating to the safety of closed ideologies and familiar binaries does nothing to ease the tensions that are a reality of multicultural societies. These issues require more consideration of context and a far more nuanced response.

In the polarising and highly controversial examples of Nat Turner and Satanic Verses there are indications of how to negotiate the difficulties of ethically charged literature in multicultural societies. The original requests by British Muslims regarding Satanic Verses were quite reasonable in retrospect. It was little to ask for a warning label about the accuracy of Rushdie’s history of Islam to be put on Satanic Verses and, similarly, if Styron had been willing to define his novel as an entirely fictional account of Nat Turner’s life, rather than claiming that he had “rarely departed” (ix Nat Turner) from the historical record there may have been considerably less anger in the African-American community. Tensions also could have been significantly eased if the British press had taken Muslim concerns seriously, or if White reviewers had made an attempt to consider how the Black community might respond to Styron’s depiction of Nat Turner. Furthermore, there are other instances of where more restraint could have been shown to minimise these controversies, such as the prestigious awards bestowed upon the novels, which made the aggrieved communities feel even more acutely that their concerns were being ignored. The publishing of Satanic Verses in paperback has been questioned by some commentators, suggesting that:

It may well be true that to put the novel into paperback is merely to follow the normal patterns of publishing. But to use this as a guide would be to ignore the fact that The Satanic Verses presents a publishing dilemma which is extremely unusual. What we should recognise, above all, is that there is a huge moral difference between publishing a book in hardback that unexpectedly offends vast numbers of people, and quite deliberately issuing the same book later in paperback in the full knowledge of the added offence this would cause [T]here will indeed be a victory for free speech. But . . . there will be a significant defeat for the values of tolerance and ordinary human sensitivity. (Webster)

Demanding that there must be absolute protection of freedom of speech recognises neither the changing realities of a multicultural society nor the limits to freedom of speech that are already in place. Sticking to such essentialist arguments reduces each side to a caricature and diminishes the opportunity for debate.

This notion of debate is also an area where there is possibility for improving the ability of each side to better understand the other. The traditional, liberal understanding of debate as I have defined it in this thesis has meant that genuine debate has been impossible, not just because of the production of binaries that occurred across the different groups concerned but because of the demand by the authors and liberal commentators that for opinions to have any validity the book must be read. While this may seem an obvious and reasonable demand, it does not recognise the position of communitarian audiences. The communities that were involved in these specific situations – the African-American community and the British Muslim community – already faced a history of humiliation, degradation and marginalisation; reading the novels would only add to that.

Both Rushdie and Styron argued that their novels suffered unwarranted criticism because they had not been widely read by the communities opposing them. Yet it is one of the powers that minority groups have; they may not be able to stop the publishing of novels but they can stop the reading of the novel. Styron's Nat Turner has no power within the African-American community because it has been eliminated from their consciousness as it is not being read. This does not eliminate the possibility for readers outside the African-American community to gain something from the novel, however. The same is true for the Muslim communities. For those Muslims in the West, while they perhaps should not expect the book to be completely banned, they can refuse to read it and they can expect the media to take their concerns about the novel seriously. It is not helpful to the situation to characterise them as ignorant because not everyone in the community who is against the novel has read it; many of those who defended Satanic Verses were also not very familiar with the novel. The ethical issues raised by the novels often extend beyond the novels themselves.

This highlights the need for more sophisticated commentary on and criticism of the ethical event of literature and the right to speak. The more criticism and research that is developed in the area, the better the chance that debates, commentaries and reviews of controversial novels such as Nat Turner and Satanic Verses will not deteriorate into arguments which rely on old binaries and stereotypes. The more effort made to understand the complex and communitarian reactions to such novels, the more value these novels will have to the audience that chooses to read them. There needs to be a greater acceptance of the problems that multicultural societies engender in regard to these issues. Ignoring the opinions and responses of affected communities or characterising them as ignorant only increases their sense of alienation and powerlessness. The result of this is to create an atmosphere of anger and disenfranchisement and causes the demands of the community to

become more extreme. While I lean towards protecting the creative freedoms of authors (which should not be considered unrelated to my own cultural imbrication in the White liberal position), obdurately clinging to that freedom and using it as an answer to all communitarian concerns has done nothing to help the Rushdie Affair, or stop antagonism and a feeling of degradation within the African-American community. If there was a greater attempt by the media, reviewers, authors and other commentators to take the concerns of these communities seriously, there is more chance for the result to be positive and all readers and non-readers to gain a greater understanding of the thoughts and sensitivities of each other.

Finally, I return to where I began, with the Mohammed cartoons controversy. Unfortunately, it would appear that almost forty years after the Nat Turner controversy and some fifteen years since the Rushdie Affair, liberal societies have not moved on from the wish to defend absolutely the right to speak when ethnic minorities challenge it. The cartoons which were published in Denmark and caused great offence to Muslims in the East and in Western societies went on to be published in many other newspapers throughout the Western world.¹⁹ While I defend the right of Nat Turner and Satanic Verses to be published in “the West” – although those publications and the response to them could have been handled a lot better – I do not defend the papers who published the Mohammed cartoons. Styron and Rushdie can be faulted for much in their attempts to depict the African-American and Muslim communities, but they did approach their subjects with seriousness. While these novels certainly were complicated by the presence of stereotypes and blasphemy, they were sophisticated works which required effort, thought, contemplation and interrogation of their audience.

The Mohammed cartoons did not do this, they brought nothing of value to the debate between Muslims and liberals, and they required no effort from their audience in

forming a response because of their complete reliance on stereotypes. There was no moral responsibility to the beliefs of the Other shown by the authors of the cartoons, and such responsibility was therefore not required of the reader. Western newspapers republished the cartoons because they claimed they were defending the freedom of the press. Yet they were not markedly increasing access to the cartoons for people who wished to view them, as may have been an argument in the past. The cartoons were – and still are – readily available on the internet. Just because the cartoons offended Muslims, and they expressed their disappointment at the publishing of them is not reason enough to republish them. Muslims were not attempting to curtail free speech or freedom of the press – once again they were simply questioning how well their values are represented by the limits of those freedoms already in place in multicultural societies. Just as the immigrants to Western multicultural societies are expected to integrate and moderate their beliefs to enable harmonious living, White liberals in these societies also bear the same responsibility. There is fear on both sides of losing the basic principles which are the foundation to the identity, but only by relinquishing familiar binaries will the “ethical event” of literature be a positive and not a destructive force within our societies.

Notes

¹ The cartoons were published in Jyllands-Posten on 30 September 2005. The twelve cartoons were all drawn by different cartoonists, with the more controversial depicting Mohammed as a terrorist and turning martyrs away from heaven saying: “Stop, we’ve run out of virgins.”

² For more on liberalism, its history and various manifestations refer to <<http://www.answers.com/topic/liberalism>>.

³ Although it may seem surprising that cultural politics only arose in the 1960s, it really was with the rise of the African-American civil rights movement and Black Nationalism that cultural politics entered the mainstream consciousness. These cultural politics developed to include the postcolonial nations and indigenous peoples. For more on Black cultural politics and its relation to history refer to Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession (1988). For the cultural politics relating to Styron’s Nat Turner, Albert E. Stone’s The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature and Cultural Politics in Sixties America (1992) is particularly useful.

⁴ This opinion is typified by Pearl K. Bell, who in a review of Sophie’s Choice argued that although Styron’s insistence on seeing the Holocaust as an example of slavery was “perhaps to be expected in a Southerner who has devoted a good deal of his mature life to contemplating that institution,” he “loses a sense of the full enormity of the Holocaust” by foregrounding the enslavement that was only a means of achieving the ultimate goal of the Nazis: “the total eradication of one people, the Jews” (184).

⁵ Morrison made these comments in a speech for the Charter Day address at Howard University in 1995. The university apparently became concerned about the reaction to the speech and refused to release transcripts to the media. One of the only

discussions of the speech appears in an editorial in the New Republic, bibliographic details of the article can be found in the Works Cited under “Holocaust in D.C.” For more on the connection between Jewish and African-American histories, see Abraham and McCoy’s article “Dealing with Histories of Oppression: Black and Jewish Reactions to Passivity and Collaboration in William Styron’s Confessions of Nat Turner and Hannah Arendt’s Eichman in Jerusalem.”

⁶ On the subject of history and its oppressors, Novick quotes Conor Cruise O’Brien on identifying with the oppressors or the oppressed with reference to apartheid in South Africa: “‘Those who can, gloat; those who can’t, brood.’ Englishmen are born gloaters; Irishmen born brooders A reformed gloater – an English liberal say, or a Swede – feels, I think, a sense of guilt about South Africa; this is because he still identifies himself, probably without being entirely conscious of the fact, with the master race. The brooder, making the opposite identification, feels no sense of guilt, only a sense of outrage” (479).

⁷ The stereotypes for males tend to be either limited to the dichotomy of the subservient Friday (Sambo slave), or “the black-beast-rapist” sexual aggressor (Painter 208). The enduring power of this latter stereotype was demonstrated when, in his campaign for the White House in 1987, George H.W. Bush utilised the image of African-American convicted rapist Willie Horton to provoke fear in White America and depict his Democrat rival Michael Dukakis as soft on crime (Smith 3).

⁸ The presentation of the minority violently killing the oppressor was controversially depicted in Witi Ihimaera’s The Matriarch (1986). Ihimaera speaks directly to the White reader and presents Maori killing White soldiers with violence and vigour. This caused some controversy in New Zealand when it was released, with some expressing distaste at the enjoyment Ihimaera took in the killings. For more on the topic refer to reviews in Landfall by Calder and Beston.

⁹ *Fatwa* is defined in the Oxford dictionary as “an authoritative ruling on a point of Islamic law.” In this case, Ayatollah Khomeini ruled that Muslim’s should endeavour to assassinate Salman Rushdie (and any publishers or editors who knew of the novel’s content) because of the alleged blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed in Satanic Verses.

¹⁰ In March 1989, 45 Muslim nations in the Islamic Conference Organisation voted to ban the book in their own countries. Other non-Muslim nations which banned the novel included Thailand, Venezuela and Japan (O’Neill 220).

¹¹ *Imam* has a number of meanings specific to different Muslim groups, but here it is referring to the more generalized definition of an honoured religious leader.

¹² The length of this thesis does not permit a detailed account of the alleged blasphemy in Satanic Verses. For such an account of the offences of Rushdie’s novel refer to pages 161-173 of Slaughter’s “The Rushdie Affair: Apostasy, Honor and Freedom of Speech.”

¹³ For more information on the relationship between dub poetry and Black British protest refer to Haberkost’s Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry.

¹⁴ There was an expression of anger over Roy’s novel in India, with two Keralan lawyers taking Roy to court for “obscenity” in the novel, charges which she fought successfully. Marxist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad also expressed anger about the “sexual anarchy” of Roy’s novel. For more on this refer to the article “EMS Attacks Literary Content of Roy’s Novel” and the article by Sreedharan both listed in the Works Cited.

¹⁵ For more discussion on the historical basis of the Brown Sahib construct and how it affects the formation of identity and the writer, see the chapter “Enter, the Brown Sahib” in Sardar and Davies, pages 76-87.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the impact of the sexual harassment charges Hill brought against Thomas when he was nominated for the United States Supreme Court refer to the excellent Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality. Ed. Toni Morrison.

¹⁷ Although I contend that White writers should be able to write as Other, it is important to stipulate that this creative imagination is confined to the pages of the book, and that White writers should not mislead readers about their identity in order to write as Other, as was the case with Helen “Demidenko” Darville, discussed in the Introduction. This case raises an important issue regarding the right to speak. The anti-Semitism in Darville’s novel was largely ignored when she was thought to be Helen Demidenko. The right to speak and the authentic voice associated with the minority speaking on their own behalf should not preclude novelists from criticism and interrogation of the stereotypes and prejudice contained in their writing. Just as racism and stereotypes in Nat Turner should have been interrogated regardless of Styron’s race, so should have “Demidenko’s” novel.

¹⁸ Slaughter discusses how Rushdie is a postmodern, not a liberal writer, and that his conceptualization of identity, particularly that of the immigrant, reflects this. It is ironic that his novel came to represent the privileging of one essentialism (liberalism) over another (communitarianism), yet “the essence of postmodernism (if one can speak of such) is the denial of essence” (202).

¹⁹ For an approximate list of the newspapers which published the cartoons, refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_that_reprinted_Jyllands-Posten%27s_Muhammad_cartoons>. The list is notable for the lack of major newspapers

from the United States and United Kingdom. These papers often discussed the crisis in editorials but did not publish the cartoons. Whether this was motivated by a greater understanding of communitarian values or a fear of retribution is difficult to say.

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